

Damaged Goods

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Damaged Goods

by [Bubonicc](#)

Summary

Stock: the goods or merchandise kept on the premises of a business or warehouse and available for sale or distribution.

As the days go by, hope slips between Rodimus' servos. The horrors seem to have no end, will someone save him before it is too late?

Chapter 1

How he had managed to get where he was and how long he had been there had slipped his mind. In all honesty he wasn't sure he cared enough at this point to really want to know. All that mattered now was waking up and dealing with the day.

The holding rooms they were placed in off shift were cramped and terribly hot. Windowless, they were always shrouded in darkness, only being able to hear each other shifting or grunting in their sleep. Nobody had personal space as they sat elbow to elbow. To make matters worse, not everybody in a holding room was of the space species. As far as he could tell, he was the only non organic being in the room.

In the darkness, his optics provided a decent amount of light, and often it drew a lot of the organics around him near, perhaps it brought them comfort to be able to see. He didn't mind, considering they were all subject to the horrors outside the door and sometimes not everybody made it back. So he let them gather close, if it gave them hope to push on one day more, so be it.

Along with the light generated by his optics, there was the soft blink of light from each of their collars. The blinking light meaning it was activated and if at any point they misbehave they would be shocked into submission or simply perish.

Along with the built in submission, there was also a small tracking chip, as when clients came, if they paid extra they were allowed to take the stock to their own private quarters and do as they wish with them.

To keep inventory, they placed chips in the collars, always knowing where their money makers were going off too in case they may have to retrieve them. It at first seemed like an easy idea to simply tear the collar off and make a run for it when a client wasn't looking, but the collars were usually embedded into Organics' skin, a wire hooking around main arteries and muscles so if torn out, it would most certainly mean certain death.

Since he wasn't organic, his collar was a special make, though still functioned the same as all the rest. Several cables came out of the wall of the collar, intertwining with his neck cables and main energon line. If pulled off, he would bleed out in mere minutes.

Escape seemed pointless and impossible after a while, though it wasn't uncommon for new stock to yank of their collars anyway and end their suffering.

The Masters seemed to have no issue getting new stock for their inventory, as most of the Stock they acquired were young naive space travelers caught off guard. In the wrong place at the wrong time, they were bagged and tagged, brought to wherever this hellhole was and rented out as an object of pleasure.

As before, he couldn't remember how he had gotten here, his memory was foggy and a part of him wasn't sure he wanted to know how. Maybe he blocked it off and it should stay blocked as he already had enough on his mind as is, but he did remember the day he was cataloged.

They shoved him forwards and removed the bag over his head. Already he had the collar on, they must have done it during transportation because there was a pole connected to it that someone was holding behind him to keep him on his knees.

He remembered his wrists hurting, bound so tight the underlying cables had split and were

bleeding. His head hurt and he can recall seeing double at the time as, what he would soon know as, The Masters moved in front of him.

They poked and prodded at him; igniting anger in him to the point he reared and cursed at them. Immediately he was pulled down by the pole, which he tried to resist. The organic that was holding it was a lot stronger, pushing him down even harder until he was forced to lie on his belly, hands squashed under him.

Their hands returned to exploring him, running down his back, touching his spoiler, and ending on his aft. When they tried to pull open his panel, he went ballistic.

He bucked and twisted, the collar on his neck pulling on his neck cables as the organic above kept pushing him down. Hands were all over him now, a lot more than one pair trying to subdue him as one worked on peeling back his panel.

It hurt of course, panels were not meant to be forced open and when their fingers snuck past the sealed seam, he had no choice but to open it.

Without hesitation, one of the soon to be Master hiked his aft up and jabbed something inside of his valve, perhaps their finger, he wasn't sure at the time. All he knew was it wiggled inside of him, working back and forth as if to explore the space to map it out before withdrawing.

He kicked and bucked and screamed in the open sight of all the other Stock members who would soon be getting the same treatment. Of course they all still had bags over their heads and could only hear his desperate cries.

To add insult to injury, the Master patted his aft as if he was some sort of obedient pet before moving back to the front of him.

"Premium." He watched the organic say, taking a data pad from another that had probably been holding him down and scribbling something on it. "Good condition, minor injuries during capture, tight valve, no seal."

No seal? What was that supposed to mean? No *valve seal*? What did that have to do with anything?

Unfortunately, he would find out sooner than later.

When it came to this house of horrors, there were ranks based on the quality of the stock, Premium being the best quality, Standard being the regular sex slaves to rent, and disposable, the ones that the Masters don't care if come back in one piece or not. Disposables were usually once Standards, used to their limits and eventually in such awful condition they are given to clients who have more violent tendencies. Disposables usually never come back after purchase.

There were few Premiums, perhaps only three in the building, usually rented out to the highest bidder for one night to use and abuse.

There was usually an added fee if a Premium Stock was damaged beyond agreed terms. He should have counted himself lucky for that, but there really was nothing to be jovial about. Considering his body type, broken parts were easily replaced, rendering his damage capacity high.

His first week in the Stock House had been rough; he was disobedient and violent towards The Masters. At any point he had a chance to struggle and be difficult he took it, and more times than not he was shocked for it, beaten to a bloody pulp and tossed into the cramped rooms with the others.

It was rare he was allowed to eat; as a matter of fact it was rare any of the Stock got to eat. If his internal time system was working correctly, they seemed to feed them only every four or five days, rendering them all weak and starving.

When the time came that he finally had to fulfill his duty as a Stock member, it was a nightmare for him. As he was pulled out by the pole connecting to his collar, someone came up to his side and jabbed him in the thigh with something. It stung and he cried out, staggering back and falling on his knees before whoever was holding the pole yanked him up, forcing him to walk.

He was dragged from his holding room, kicking and screaming and tossed into one of the Premium rooms. At first it seemed okay, considering the room didn't match the rest of the building.

The room was bright, lively, the berth sitting in the center covered in crimson sheets embroidered with gold pattern. There was a tray of energon goodies on the berth, and he rushed to them. His tank twisted and turned, starving as she stuffed the treats into his mouth by the hand full.

He paused, feeling dizzy suddenly, heavy and sluggish, he looked at his hands. His fingers multiplied and he took a sloppy step back, bumping into something, someone.

"Hungry, little one?" Before he could do anything, the big mech grabbed his wrists, yanking them above his head and lifting him off the ground. "Oh, you look so much better in person than in the pictures." As far as he could tell, whoever this was was significantly larger than he was, but of the same kind. Metallic and strong, their armor was a deep crimson, and their optics hidden behind a black visor.

As if he was nothing more than a piece of paper, the mech tossed him down onto the berth and slapped the tray of treats off as he climbed on.

"What a pretty thing." The crimson mech traced his golden spoiler, pinching the tip and watching the fear spread across his Premium's face. He purred in response, loving that look while grinding his hips down against his Stock's groin.

"I heard you were new, I like breaking in the new Stock. The pretty ones, that is." He stroked the Stock's cheek, watching his optics frantically look around for some sort of way out of this, but there was none.

"Get off!" The smaller mech cried out, shoving his hands up and trying to push the larger mech off but failing. His arms felt like jelly, and upon contact they seemed to just bounce right off the big mech's chestplate. He tried for his face, grabbing at their visor but finding his fingers were too weak to really get a grip on anything.

That seemed to amuse him, along with further attempts to get him off. He allowed the pitiful little thing to squirm and struggle, at the mercy of whatever they had jabbed into him earlier and at this hulking mass' mercy.

He grew bored after a minute or two and grabbed the Stock's hips roughly. Harshly, he flipped him over; hiking his aft up and being less than gentle while grabbing at his closed modesty plate and yanking it off.

"No!" The Stock crawled forwards, trying to grab the berth's railing but was yanked back and his aft harshly nosed against something stiff. "Don't!" he tried again, and once more he was pulled back and finally a large hand slapped down on his back, forcing him face down into the covers.

He could feel the servo tips digging into his spinal strut causing him pain if he tried to sit back up.

Coolant welled in his optics, his spark racing as he tried to knot his fingers into the berth's covers. He could feel the mech behind him shifting, aiming, and then there was the awful searing white pain of penetration.

Outside the room, his muffled howls could be heard, often breaking off into loud choked sobs, and then finally silence after what felt like forever.

The first week wasn't easy, nor was the next, or the one after that. Healing on its own took weeks, his valve swollen and sore from mistreatment, his frame bloodied and bruised from the beatings he endured when he was stubborn and defiant with other clients who came to have a piece of him. At no point did it get easier.

When he was tossed back into a holding room with others, he was thankful they always seemed to catch him and set him down on the floor to rest.

That seemed to be the only good thing about this place, even though The Masters were cruel; the Stock seemed to try their best to take care of one another.

They shared what little food they had with one another, tried their best to heal wounds with what little scraps of cloth they had.

Old Stock tried to comfort the new, giving them tips on how to get through the day, how to make The Masters happy and content. It was all awful advice really, just lie down and take it seemed to be the five star suggestion here.

A month, maybe two had passed and he had learned how to survive, though he still put up a fight when he could, considering that Crimson mech who had first broke him in was a frequent customer, often requesting him to berth for a night. Those nights were always the worst, filled with pain and tears, and large greedy hands that tore at his panels.

Other nights, when different clients rented him for the night, he was pleased to find them much more kind. Or at least some deranged form of it.

Some organics that purchased him just wanted a body to blow off steam, dump their seed and move on. Usually those sort of left him on the berth when they were done, paid and left. He wasn't sure if he liked those the best or the ones who actually paid more to bring them to their personal homes and feed him and let him wash up when they were done.

It's nice, and the shower is nice, but more often than not those who allow him to shower just like to watch him clean himself. More often than not he had caught his buyer jacking off to him washing, and as much as it disgusted him, he had had worse.

Though there was an unfortunate protocol that came after being brought off property. It was something he fought against tooth and nail, hating it to the very core.

It wasn't uncommon for Stock to be poisoned by rival Stock owners, and when returned, it was mandatory that all Stock have their stomachs pumped of the contents to avoid poisoning. Even if they were not poisoned, the pumping went on anyway.

Forced onto his knees, arms behind his back, a long green rubber tube would be forced down his intake.

He cursed it and screamed, kicking and screaming until The Masters had to gather around him and hold him in place so they could work. They would squeeze his cheeks, trying to get him to open his clenched denta, but he wouldn't usually. A punch to the gut got him to loosen up and they all stuffed their fingers in to keep him from closing before inserting the tube.

Down it went, making him gag and coolant welling under his optics, spilling over as he choked and listen to the sickening gurgle the tube made as his tank was pumped.

The following night was awful, tank empty and aching for food, he refused any the other Stock members tried to offer him. The other Premium ones offered most of theirs, understanding his distress. He always refused it, as it often made him feel dizzy and tired. It was probably laced with some sort of sedative, to keep them compliant in their housing rooms and keep them calm. If there was an uproar they would all be too weak to fight back.

It couldn't get any worse than that right? He just had to deal with the Crimson mech coming back on average twice maybe three times a week to tear his valve lining, the occasional stomach pump when a client had enough to take him out of the building, and once in awhile a shower peeper. Some nights when clingy clients finished with him and wanted to nap against him, he would just stare at the ceiling until their time was up. It couldn't get any worse, right?

Wrong. So very wrong.

Asleep on his side, exhausted, hungry and still healing from the previous night, the door to their holding room swung open.

"Rodimus, stand." One of the many Masters stepped in, the Stock around the door clearing an immediate path from him to the red and gold mech on the ground. "Do not make me ask twice." He had been here long enough that he had gotten tired of being dragged and often went at will, earning him the privilege of walking without the pole but the potential to be shocked into submission. More often than not he submitted.

Struggling to rise, Rodimus stood on tired feet and trudged his way through the path the other Stock members had made for him. They were all silent as he walked by, only murmuring when he passed them and when the door was closed.

"A seal is requested of your next client." The Master grabbed him by his forearm and started to walk with him hastily down the hall.

"What-" Half out of it, Rodimus tried to look at his Master's face, seeing only his features swirl and warp. He was swung into a side room, one he had never seen before but immediately put on the breaks when he saw a medical berth. "W-Wait wait wait-" He reversed, though his Master had a good grip on him and easily dragged him forwards. "What do you mean... what do you mean?" He panicked, feeling his spark suddenly flutter in fear in his chest as he was shoved towards the table.

"Lie down and make it easy on yourself." A deep voice he hadn't heard before sounded in front of him, and another organic, like the others, stepped forwards. Surgical gloves that were wrinkled and possibly one size too big were on his hands, never a good sign.

"I don't-" his frame seized, a powerful jolt of electricity bursting through him and making him clench his denta so hard he thought they might crack. When the shock stopped he staggered forwards, falling on his knees and catching the tabletop to support himself.

He didn't get a chance to stand up straight; Masters were already hauling him up onto the slab

and holding him down.

"Wait! Wait!" He cried out, trying to sit up but getting shoved back down and a mask forcibly held over his face. He could feel cool air blasting through it, over his mouth and nose and within seconds he felt himself relaxing. He didn't want too, and he struggled as hard as he could for as long as he could until he couldn't move any of his limbs and the call of recharge was beckoning.

"You're alright-" He heard, his optics sagging as blobs moved above and around him. He could feel something cold on his lower belly, something wet maybe, were they disinfecting him? What was happening?

He couldn't tell, and he couldn't ask as darkness swallowed him.

He woke up with a start, legs and arms flailing in the air as he screamed and tried to figure out where he was.

The room was bright, and he was alone as far as he could tell, considering when he onlined his optics he immediately had to hide them from the florescent light. Having to calibrate them to the unfamiliar brightness, he looked around the room.

It was empty, padded, and there was a small glass of green energon. Medical grade? It sat by what looked to be a door, though there was no handle which meant he was locked in from the outside.

As he rolled onto his side, he hissed in pain, his abdomen throbbing unbearably. He reached a hand down to cradle it, which was a mistake because when he touched the sensitive spot he saw static dance in his vision field.

Looking down, his optics swirled and shrunk in horror at the large horizontal weld line across his lower belly. It was puffy and swollen and some energon was seeping from certain points.

What the hell was this?!

His vents flapped open as his breathing escalated. Panic swallowed him quickly, drowning him in fear until all he could do was scream into the emptiness of the room. Screaming was really all he had left, and he kept it up until his vocalizer was sore and his belly hurt even more.

It took a strength he didn't think he had to drag himself across the room on his side to the medical grade. It was only maybe three feet but it seemed like a mile.

Greedy hands grabbed at the glass, bringing it to his lips and sucking it down faster than he had ever before. It was enough to dull the pain, but not enough to get rid of it.

Crawling to the closest corner, he curled up in a ball, sobbing into his own chest for hours until sleep called to him.

Waking up, white room, sleep, wake up, white room, sleep. Repeat for what he thought might have been four days before finally the door to the room was in opened and two Masters stepped in.

One hauled him up to sit, the other looked at the weld on his belly.

"Good." He said, and just like that Rodimus was hauled to his feet and removed from the room only to be brought to the Premium room.

Instead of being thrown on the berth, he was gently placed, and of course came the sting to his thigh. Whatever cocktail they mixed together to get him even dizzier than he was now he was glad for. It would dull the pain; allow him to vanish into the recesses of his mind, except something was different this time.

His valve throbbed, and he felt his spike swelling behind its panel. His frame's fans popped on and he felt an odd pang of arousal flooding his systems. He didn't really think much of it, at least not until his least favorite customer came in.

"There's my pretty boy, all doped up, just for me." He didn't have to look up to know it was the crimson mech talking; he had grown familiar with his voice. "Oh, and we have an extra today now don't we." Large thumbs pressed into Rodimus' belly, lightly tracing over the weld. "It's a shame you didn't have a seal before you came. I would have loved to pop it." His hands moved up more, groping anything he could. "But, that is what they make replacement seals for, right?" Was that what it was? Inside of him, a new factory seal? Just for him to tear through? What kind of a sick-

His hips were harshly grabbed, and as he tried to stop himself from being pulled down, it was useless. He whimpered as his legs were forced apart and that hefty spike was dropped between tattered red thighs.

His valve clenched against his will, whatever concoction they had stabbed him with was making him crave when he didn't want to. Now that he thought about it it was probably to help with the pain of the seal tear.

"Stop!" It was too late; the mech was already pushing inside of him, right up against the seal and flexing it painfully. "Don't!" A large hand covered his mouth, and he grabbed at it with no hopes of removing it.

He squeezed his optics shut, bracing for impact, but there was no way to prepare for it.

The crimson mech pulled his hips back, and then lunged forwards, muffling Rodimus' squeak of pain with his cupped hand.

The seal tore and with it came the sensory overload. Rodimus' frame arched, frozen in a pain pleasure mix, the pain significantly outweighing the pleasure.

Clawing at the mech's hand, his frame bounced with each new thrust, his pronged toes spreading and then curling when he felt the mech shove every little bit into him and jab at the back of his valve.

It hurt, and he wanted it to stop, all of it.

Opening his mouth into the palm of the mech, he bit down on his middle servo as hard as he could, earning a loud curse from the mech rutting him.

The hand is pulled away and in that instant, Rodimus launched up, denta flashing as he latched onto the mech's neck and bit into the closest neck cable he can find.

His arms were weak but he held onto him when he struggled, cursing and grabbing at the red

and gold mech until he got a grip on his neck and slammed him into the berth.

"You worthless piece of *slag*." He squeezed Rodimus' intake, half crushing it as he roared in his face. "I will make your life miserable for that!" His neck bled, but it wasn't anything fatal. Rodimus had missed his main energon line by mile.

"Haaph!- Urk- Mnnng-" Rodimus gagged under him, his optics bulging slightly as the hand around his neck grew tighter. There was a loud crunching noise, as the sudden buzzing noise he could hear emitting from his own mouth as he knew right then his vocalizer had been crushed.

He wasn't sure if he was lucky that his Masters came in to save him, as they shocked him into submission even though he was half strangled by the time the crimson mech was pulled off of him.

As punishment for harming a client, it was usually termination, but the crimson mech stopped them.

"No, I want him alive. I want him every week, every week, with a seal, ready for him. Gagged, and ready for him. Leave his vocalizer the way it is. Let him try and scream now." He watched as Rodimus was dragged from the room, energon spilling out of his mouth as his ruptured vocalizer clicked and popped. He coughed, and it sputtered out of his mouth, and he tried to speak, gagging when he tried.

Dragged away and tossed into a holding room, he is caught like usual by the other Stock members. They flooded around him, touching him and checking him over, putting energon and food to his lips that he could not eat, but he just stared at the ceiling, his optics pale as they faded nearly offline.

Tomorrow was another day.

Chapter 2

"Swallow." The voice above him rumbled, squeezing his puffy cheeks to the point his lips pursed together. If he tried to pull away the already vise grip would tighten, making him whimper and shake. "Do as I say." The Crimson mech watched as Rodimus' face scrunched, struggling with his gag reflex as the transfluid just wouldn't go down no matter how many times he tried. Already his tank was turning at the taste of the foul substance in his mouth and he could feel himself wanting to purge. " *Swallow* ." The mech's voice was unkind, unforgiving as he squeezed even harder, threatening to indent even Rodimus' frail cheek plates.

Forcing one large gulp, Rodimus had to fight with the knot in his intake to get it all down, opening his mouth only a little bit to the mech above him to show him what he had done.

"Open," Pushing a large thumb into Rodimus' mouth and pressing his glossa down, the Crimson mech purred with delight. "See, was that so hard?" He dug his thumb in a little deeper, taking pleasure in making Rodimus gag and almost purge.

Transfluid never sat well with him, like a bunch of hot stones in his tank it made him ill to the point he would spend the day retching. Even the smell of it would set him off, making his tank flip flop and his intake expand, ready to purge even when his tank was empty.

Spoiler sagging, Rodimus swayed between thick thighs, his knees sore from having been sitting on them for so long. How long had it been even, an hour, two hours? Not that it had really mattered, he had nowhere else to be other than his cell to be. Then again, anyplace but here was better.

"Stand." Extracting his thumb from Rodimus' sticky mouth, the mech haled him up before he even had a chance to do it on his own time. "Lucky for you I don't have time to stick around and play further." Grabbing Rodimus' hips, the mech pulled him right up against his groin. His spike, which Rodimus had just finished with, was still out and fully erect, getting between them and squishing against his belly.

"Mm-" Rodimus' vocalizer clicked, his spoiler twitching as he felt the spike rubbing against the scar on his belly. Not far beyond the scar was a new false seal, ready to be torn, but instead, the mech just rubbed his spike along the weld. "Nng-" It was sickening, and as Rodimus watched the mech smear some of the spike's still leaking fluid across his belly, he felt the urge to gag.

"I'll have to tear your seal another day. I have some important business to attend to. I just wanted to make sure I got one last little bit in with you before I go." A deep rumble rolled through the mech's body as he chuckled to himself, his spike sliding back into its housing as he stood up.

Snagging one of Rodimus' hands, nearly crushing it even, the mech towered over him and pressed his masked face to Rodimus' cheek. He nuzzled into him, and with a disgusted look, Rodimus leaned away. He would have snarled if he could, but all he really could do was show his fangs and make an angry look.

"Fine, be that way." Releasing Rodimus' hand, the mech shoved him to the side and moved towards the door. "I'll be back my pet." He would always be back, whether he liked it or not, he always came back.

The door to Rodimus' room slammed shut and he was left alone with nothing but his sore frame and his upset tank. If he was lucky maybe the Masters would give him a little bit of energon

to wash the foul taste away... but that was unlikely.

He made a bitter face as the off world energon touched his glossa. He shouldn't have been surprised it tasted so foul considering he wasn't exactly on a Cybertronian friendly planet. It was a miracle that some of the shops even sold items he could consume at all.

He wasn't here on business, or at least he shouldn't have been considering he was supposed to be taking a well deserved vacation. Though that was difficult since Ultra Magnus wasn't the type to take time off... but the higher ups had insisted. Since the war had come to a close, the galaxy seemed to settle and take a breath, leaving higher ranking officers like himself with little to do other than shift paper work around. If it had been his choice he would have rather shifted paper around and categorized it rather than be forced to... relax and have fu-... ffuu-

Never mind.

The first few days of his... time off, Magnus occupied himself with reorganizing his home. Having spent so little time there while the war progressed, he found it oddly satisfying to find old items he hadn't realized he had.

When he would settle for a break from his cleaning, he often read the galactic paper, which had eventually brought him to his current position off world.

Often, the paper's front page would be littered with articles and images in all sorts of languages that his optics usually had no issue translating. He often skipped over reports of robberies and other organic shenanigans that he didn't care much for and put his attention on the missing person's page.

Most of the portraits were organic beings he didn't much care for, though he lingered on portraits of robotic beings. Some of their frame styles were not Cybertronian, perhaps some of them slave bots or simple working droids gone missing on the job. It was highly likely that had already been sold and scrapped for what little money their bodies could provide.

All of these reports were just noise, nothing that was ever taken seriously by any kind of police force. During the time of the war, there had been more important things to deal with than missing persons.

Sipping at his morning energon, Magnus tapped a large servo on one single image, a Cybertronian. There had been a few sprinkled inside of the paper, nobody he knew as he guessed they were bots who colonized off world. Regardless, they had been missing for years, and who knew if anybody was actually looking for them at this point. By now they were just... casualties of war.

It should have been a job for a smaller patrol, even a job for the galactic council to look into if he had requested it, but he had the time. It would certainly be more fulfilling than alphabetizing his entire bookshelf...again. The work was simple, honest even, and he wouldn't have to report his findings if someone on the list turned up. The most he had to do was cross off their name and make sure they were brought to where they needed to be.

So he set out, with his little ship and a manifest of all the missing Cybertronians he could download from his home archive. If he was lucky he could scratch a few off the list and put a few

minds at ease, but even then he wasn't that hopeful.

His first few leads were stale, as time would make do that after so long, and more often than not he always found himself at a dead end. Planet to planet, leads ran nowhere and everywhere... but it kept him busy. If anything, he did manage to settle a few disputes among town's people, small things, nothing that would really have changed the course of the universe, but again it was better than sitting around doing nothing.

Now, he had set his ship down on a planet to refuel, picking up a few papers from some credit friendly shops and flipping through them for any new missing persons reports. By now Magnus had a datapad he could have just logged onto, but he was always adding new people to the list.

Sipping at his energon, he flipped a page, his face turning sour again as the liquid was just as disgusting the first time he drank it.

"Come on! Pick up your pace!" A voice shouted from across the market. "I'll be charged a late fee if you don't hurry up!"

Glancing up, Magnus scanned the crowd, seeing nothing but bustling organics at what he could only imagine were fruit stands and oddities. His optics rotated when he spotted something across the way, something that caught the sun and glistened as if it had a metallic surface.

"Move it!" An alien, long and lanky with thick tentacle like arms push through the marketplace. Wrapped in one slimy tentacle seemed to be a leash of some sort, and at first Magnus had assumed it had some kind of an exotic pet. At least that was until what it was connected to stumbled out from a group of people and fell down onto its hands and knees.

Sitting up straight, Magnus felt his plating flare as he watched the alien yank the leash connected to, what Magnus could no doubt make out as, a cybertronian. It was significantly smaller than he was, red and gold, and absolutely filthy as it tried to get back onto its hands and knees.

"Get up!" The alien snapped, turning to face the red and gold mech only to slap it across its face with one long wet tentacle. "You filthy scrap pile, I said get up!" It yanked the leash, forcing the bot's head to jerk up.

Desperately it grabbed at the leash's cable, wheezing as it was forced to its feet and back along the path the alien was frantically trying to go.

It zipped past Magnus, not even acknowledging he had been sitting only feet away and witnessed the spectacle. What really seemed to surprise him though was that nobody else seemed to even... care about the mistreatment. The marketplace continued to bustle and nobody... no organic even batted an eye.

It had taken him a few minutes to remember he was on the outskirts of the solar system and things like this happened. Planets filled with slave traders and lawless criminals who could get away with anything as long as they avoided detection.

Keeping his optics low as the alien passed, Magnus glanced up at the dirty gold and red mech passed by. He scanned its frame, seeing no indication of a faction right away, but then again it could have been removed.

Watching the alien drag the mech off for a few more feet, he stood and followed, leaving

his energon and newspapers behind.

He had followed for several blocks, pausing and leaning against few street lamps in an attempt to act casual despite his obnoxious size. When he spotted the alien entering a building, towing the red mech behind, Magnus waited a few minutes before following suit.

Stopping just before the building's door, he leaned to the side and examined the blacked out windows and then the sign hanging slightly crooked on the wall. It read something like "Foreign Pleasures: Quality Stock" if his translating software was working correctly. Other than that the building was unmarked and rather mundane looking, blending in with dozens of other buildings, giving Magnus the feeling that nobody would know what this building was for unless told about it.

Stepping inside, Magnus had to duck down a bit as the ceiling didn't quite accommodate his actual stature. Walking with a slight tilt, Magnus kept his hands claws to his person, already feeling his plating crawling at such a filthy place.

He paused when organics slithered by him, not seeming to care about his presence, was it common that mechs like him entered such places? They didn't seem alarmed that he infiltrated, then again he had walked through the front door.

Deciding to follow the aliens who zipped past him to not look as suspicious, Magnus was lead to a large show room. There he merged with a group of aliens chanting next to a stage, holding credits up with their filthy hands as the dealer on stage chanted all sorts of prices for the sad looking slave being presented.

It was deplorable and he would certainly make sure this circus was shut down the moment he was out safely with that mech he spotted. He could be one of the mechs on his list that had gone missing, if so, he was determined to get him back safely. Even if he wasn't on it, he wasn't about to leave one of his own kind in such animal like conditions.

It took a few minutes of searching but a familiar gleam of gold caught Magnus' optic. There, across a small gap stood the mech he had saw in the market square.

He stood with his head down, hands cuffed in front of him, tethered to the ground with some kind of energy cable. He swayed back and forth, slowly, not acknowledging any of the commotion around, perhaps he was just used to it.

Magnus' fuel pump sputtered at the thought of this poor mech being stuck here for that long.

Stepping forward and advancing, Magnus moved down the line of slaves and examined each one as if interested. He paused when he stepped in front of the red and gold mech, expecting him to look up, but instead he kept his head down.

"Interested in the Premium?" A voice to Magnus right spoke up, stepping in front of him before he could turn to look.

"Permium?" Magnus watched the alien, known as the Master grab the red mech's face and yank it upward. The mech's beautiful blue optics were pale, fogged over with some sort of induced

haze. His cheeks were bruised and what Magnus could only guess as crusted energon ran from his once bleeding nose. His paint had been chipped and it looked like he hadn't been detailed in who knew how long.

"Yes, one of our best stock items currently available. Rodimus is one of our more popular items." The Master slapped Rodimus' aft, making him step forward, but his face didn't react. "I can give you a fine price for one night."

"How much to buy him?" Magnus gritted his denta, trying to stay composed. It took everything he had not to put his fist through this thing's face, but it was him against every alien in this room.

"Oh no no no, he is not *for sale* , he is for *rent* ." The Master gave Magnus a suspicious look. "Are you... some kind of..." The alien was cut off as Magnus raised a hand.

"No, just new, forgive my ignorance." Magnus watched the alien think for a moment, and for sure he thought it would kick him out, but instead it swayed around Rodimus.

"Well, for a fine price you can have him as long as you desire for exactly one night. In the morning you will return him here, or," The alien tapped on the collar around Rodimus' neck, "we find you, and we *will* find you."

Magnus looked at the collar, watching the little light blinking on the sides. He wasn't at all surprised that had a way of tracking their inventory. Getting it off when he got Rodimus out shouldn't be too difficult.

"Alright, how much to rent him?"

"Fifty thousand credits." Magnus glared down at the alien, knowing it took pleasure in overcharging him. He didn't doubt it hiked up the price just on Magnus' appearance. He was clean cut and prompt, armor shimmering, he could afford it.

"He's damaged and you want me to pay that much?" Magnus crossed his arms, but not before pointing out Rodimus' damaged spoiler. "Let alone the rest of him. He's filthy. Plus, what's wrong with him, why does he seem so... distant." At no point had Rodimus even tried to make eye contact with any of them, only swaying back and forth. He seemed to be listening to the Master, his spoiler twitching whenever he heard his name mentioned, but nothing more.

"Mhm, Rodimus is a very spirited stock piece. When he gets too rowdy, we dose him, keeps him compliant and quiet." The alien pointed out a section on Rodimus' thigh that was dented and punctured, no doubt from some kind of injection. "I would suggest selling you some if you choose to purchase him for a night. It will keep him doing all the things you desire. Unless you like them feisty. If it makes you feel better I can offer you a Premium room, for free, it has a bath in it." It was a nice offer, but Magnus wasn't planning on sticking around. If anything he wanted to get out of here as fast as he could with Rodimus and take him someplace safe. He could feel his fuel pup tighten every so often as the Master spoke, sickened by how inhuman it was. How could it speak so openly about a living being as if it was nothing but... property.

"Two nights, and I'll pay full price." It would give him time to fuel his ship and get off planet and then some. At least if he was far away it would take the time to catch up if they could. "I'll even buy any other Cybertronians you may have on site." As he finished speaking the alien snorted.

"Heh, Rodimus is the only non organic we have in stock. Your kind are not easy to catch

now that the war is over. It used to be so easy picking up the wounded and slapping the collars on. Now its actual work." As the alien chuckled, it stroked Rodimus' cheek. "This is the only one I have, and he is in nice shape. I'll accept your offer, two nights, but I expect him buffed when you bring him back." Moving away from Rodimus to get a data pad, the alien held it up to Magnus for him to scan his credit chit, once cleared, the alien unhooked Rodimus' shackles and handed the energy tether over.

"Enjoy~" Magnus grimaced at its joy, what a foul creature, taking pleasure in such a thing.

"Come." Magnus spoke, as much as he didn't want to, he gently tugged on the lead. Rodimus stepped forward, though he was less than graceful about it as he tilted as if his equilibrium wasn't proper. He straightened after a moment, then took another sloppy step and followed Magnus through the crowd. "You're safe now." Magnus whispered, navigating through the organics and using his hulking size to clear a path for his drunken purchase.

As the two of them managed to get out of the building, Magnus walked an extra two blocks to make sure they were not followed before turning to Rodimus.

"Hey," Magnus knelt down so he was eye level with the little mech, "I'm not going to do anything to you." As he spoke he looked over the collar, seeing it interwoven with Rodimus' neck cables. He frowned, as this was going to make getting it off a little more difficult, but not impossible. "You're safe, I'm here to-" Magnus stopped, his spark sinking as Rodimus just stared at him, his pale face blank. He blinked every few minutes, flinched when birds flew over, then swayed in place, waiting to be toted around. "Primus." Magnus whispered to himself. He reached up and touched Rodimus' cheek, feeling it scorching. "Alright, let's get you out of here first." Standing, Magnus looked over Rodimus' frail frame for only a second before scooping him up bridal style. Keeping the little mech tucked against his chest protectively, he made his way back to his ship.

Setting Rodimus down on the ship's sad excuse for a built-in berth, Magnus hurried about his cabin. He pulled out all sorts of items from several different compartments before rushing back to Rodimus' side.

Rodimus had barely moved the entire time Magnus had left him alone. His lips moved as he seemed to try to say something, but instead his vocalizer just clicked and let out a single beep. His golden fingers picked at a seam on his stomach, almost nervously as he felt Magnus loom over him suddenly. His optics rotated and flickered, almost as if he had been trying to focus on Magnus' face but his vision was failing him. Instead of seeing a pale friendly face, he saw nothing but blue and white blotches.

"Alright, let's get a look at that collar." Magnus pulled up a stool before very gently taking Rodimus' chin into his hand. He pulled tilted Rodimus' head to the side even more, forcing him to expose the side of his neck so he could get a better look at what he was working with.

Whatever technology it was that kept Rodimus bound to the collar was more advanced than he thought. Certainly he could brute force it off, but judging by how the cables were linked through Rodimus' cables, it would do unimaginable amounts of damage.

With his free hand, Magnus used the tips of his fingers to stroke at the damaged cables

lining the front of Rodimus' intake. Gingerly, he pulled the collar outward a bit and got an even better look at the crushed metal, wincing at it.

If he had been a medic perhaps he would have known what to do, or maybe even just a better tech, but what he did know how to do was scramble a signal.

Reaching down into his lap where he had gathered the items he had looted his ship for; he started to construct a small chip. It had been one of the many perks of working with the Wreckers back in the old days. Perceptor had always been so handy and always keen on sharing what he knew. He would have to thank him.

Pressing the chip against the collar and pressing a button on the top of it, it blinked red only once, then flickered green. Perfect, it was working. As long as it scrambled the signal long enough for him to get off planet and back home he should have no issue. Or so he hoped. He would have to put in a few calls to some old acquaintances to see if they were able to help.

For now, it was a matter of getting Rodimus off of this hell hole and someplace safe. He would no doubt be grateful when he emerged from this induced haze, or whatever it was. A hot meal would do him some good too.

"Just sit tight, alright? It's going to be a few hours ride before we get where we need to go." Trying to talk to Rodimus was fruitless, but he tried none the less. The little mech below him was so frail, so... used. He was glad he found him when he had.

The flight home had been quiet, Rodimus making no noise whatsoever other than the sounds of him shifting on the berth.

When Magnus had set his ship down, he had expected to see Rodimus a little more clear headed, but still that glassy optics stared up at him. It made his spark ache as he gathered Rodimus into his arms and walked across the landing pad, heading for the stairs down to his apartment.

It took him a few tries to get his key card to swipe through the slat with Rodimus in his arms but when it beeped in confirmation at him he kicked the door open then kicked it closed behind him.

Coasting across the living room straight for his bedroom, Magnus went to set Rodimus down on the plush comforters before suddenly hesitating.

His frame was... disgusting... and his sheets were so clean...

Shaking his head, Magnus set Rodimus down regardless; his recovery meant more than his sheets.

Gingerly, Magnus pressed the back of his hand to Rodimus' still boiling forehead. It may have just been the drugs, but he was burning up and he could only benefit from having his core temperature cooled.

Vanishing from Rodimus' side for a few minutes, all the red and gold bot could hear was the sound of water running. After what seemed like ten minutes, the large mech returned and sat by his side once more. A heavy bucket of water was set down between his large feet, a few separate

washcloths hanging over the buckets edge.

"Alright, let's get you cleaned up. Hopefully whatever is in your system will have run its course by the morning. If not then I'm taking you to a medic." Dunking one of the cloths into the water, Magnus started to wash off bits of grime and mud.

First, Magnus started with Rodimus' face, dabbing at his dirty cheeks and cleaning as much grime away as he could. He was gentle around his collar, wincing as he cleaned what energon caked cables he could before moving down to Rodimus' arms and chest.

He was as gentle as possible, pausing whenever the little mech before him shifted. He watched his mouth, dry white lips parting as if he were to speak but still nothing came out. His blue optics dimmed periodically, and then flickered to life as if suddenly at attention.

Washing each of Rodimus' fingers, Magnus paused a moment and sighed. His hands were so small, the paint chipped on the ends, suggesting he had tried to claw his way out of somewhere. The joints creaked when he bent them, and he made a note to himself to offer Rodimus an oil bath when he was more himself. Wouldn't that be relaxing?

Returning to his cleaning, Magnus was hesitant when he came to the long weld across Rodimus' lower belly. He grazed the cloth over it first, washing away any mud or energon before letting his own fingers run over it.

It was fairly new, perhaps a week old, but judging from the scar, it seemed it the area had been welded more than once. Why?

Squeezing out his cloth and getting a fresh one, Magnus continued until Rodimus was as clean as he could get him. With the remaining cloths, Magnus soaked them and draped one over Rodimus' forehead, hoping it would help reduce the fever.

Standing, Magnus picked up his bucket and went to empty it, returning a few minutes later with an energon glass in hand.

As he sat down by Rodimus' side, he slid his large hand under his head and gingerly tilted him up enough that he could press his lips to the edge of the glass.

"Alright, just a sip." Magnus whispered, as if speaking too loud might send the mech before him reeling. "Just a little sip." He tilted the glass and the energon splashed against pale lips, flooding lips that refused to open. The liquid streamed down the sides of Rodimus' cheek and chin, staining the pillow below.

"Scrap." Setting Rodimus' head back down on the pillow; Magnus wiped his mouth off and set the glass down. He shouldn't have been surprised Rodimus was too weak to eat; he was too weak to do anything.

Rubbing the back of his neck and sighing, Magnus leaned back in his chair and just watched Rodimus' optics flicker on and off.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 3

Three times his optics shorted out, and three times he tried to reset them until finally on the fourth they dimmed to life. Vision blurry, he had expected to see the moldy ceiling of a backwater hotel above him, but instead it was a pristine white. Above a ceiling fan twirled around slowly, wafting down a cool breeze over his cheeks.

He squinted, confused as he realized something was off. In fact a lot seemed off the more he came to his senses.

The bed was soft, too soft in fact to be some scummy hotel in the middle of nowhere. Never had he been brought to a place that had clean sheets, sheets that smelt freshly washed and harbored no stains from the previous person who had laid there.

Was he... tucked in?

He shifted and tried to sit himself up, still a little woozy from the mystery concoction running through his lines. Even though he was dizzy, he was glad to at least be able to register his surroundings. For the life of him he couldn't remember what had happened the night before, not that he was complaining. Vague memories of someone big and blue in front of him, talking words he knew but couldn't process. He remembered walking, being talked to, and then nothing. If he had to guess, it was like any other client who bought him for a night, a walk to the hotel, a frag or two, maybe more, sleep, then the return to his masters.

Except when he looked to the side to where he had expected to see who had purchased him for the night, the bed was bare. Sheets still tucked in as if nobody had lain beside him at all, he was alone. To make him even more confused, his frame wasn't sore, or at least his valve wasn't. His HUD showed no damage report, which usually hosted a jubilee of valve tears from rough clients, but this time... nothing.

Giving the room a more detailed look about, Rodimus' optics narrowed on the night stand beside the bed. There, on a tray stood a tall glass of energon and what looked to be a typical breakfast setup.

Tank twisting at the sight, Rodimus withdrew his eyes grimacing as the thought of eating sickened him. When he was returned to his Masters it would only make the tank pumping more uncomfortable. It was better to leave empty, pumping sessions lasted shorter that way and he had grown accustomed to scraps later in the day.

While shaking his head to try and clear the foggy haze, there was a soft click and creak in front of him. Looking up as the door to the room opened, his optics rotated and narrowed on a white face and a large blue head.

"Oh good, you're awake and sitting up." The rest of Magnus moved into the room, and Rodimus' spoiler sagged at the sheer size of the mech. He was larger than the Crimson mech who so often toyed with him, and it made Rodimus' tank swell and turn at the thought of another large mech regularly torturing him. He had never seen him before either; it was rare in itself that Rodimus ever had a client who had a robotic quality like his own. It wasn't uncommon though, so he shouldn't have been too surprised, maybe he was a new regular, or just a one night stand. A mech moving by who happened to see some valve was for sale. "How are you feeling? You had me worried last night."

Last night? I don't even know what happened last night.

Watching closely as the bigger mech moved about the room, he felt his fans hitch when the mech paused at the untouched breakfast tray.

"Haven't eaten yet?" Magnus glanced at Rodimus who was also looking at the plate of food. "It's alright, you can have this." Picking up one of the biscuits, Magnus extended a large hand to the little red and gold mech. Immediately, Rodimus turned his head away, grimacing and shaking his head. "Not hungry?" He held it out for a few seconds more but didn't push the matter. He would get hungry on his own time and eat, right? "That's alright." Setting the biscuit down and pulling up a chair that had been in the corner, Magnus sat himself down close to the bed.

Spoiler shivering wearily, Rodimus looked him up and down, not sure what he was planning, but sat obediently regardless. The last thing he wanted was a client complaining to the Masters that he wasn't up to their standards, and he would be punished. All he had to do was wait patiently, do as he was told, and he would be returned and he could sleep in his cell with all the others in peace. Or at least what was the only thing he knew as peace these days.

"So," Magnus' voice was soft, smooth even, "What's your name? Is it actually Rodimus? Or did they give you that name? My name is Ultra Magnus." He paused, giving Rodimus time to answer, but the scuffed and dented mech before him was silent. In fact he gave Magnus a questioning look; conversation at this point for him was limited.

"It's alright, you can speak." Again Rodimus said nothing, but he licked his lips and for a moment Magnus thought he might pipe up. "You're safe."

Yeah right.

"Tssk-" Rodimus' vocalizer fizzled and popped, it was about the most noise he could make. Simple grunts and wheezed words that were never complete or truly coherent, he was at the mercy of fried circuits and a crushed vocalizer.

With a sigh, Magnus leaned back and rubbed his chin in thought. He shouldn't be disappointed, it would take time for Rodimus to adjust, and he understood that. What mattered now was getting him cleaned up and possibly identified. If he was lucky Rodimus would show up in the missing database and from there they could get him relocated with proper treatment.

"Alright, we don't have to talk; I know it's a lot all at once. How about a hot shower, does that sound good?" Making it sound like the best thing ever, Rodimus flinched at Magnus' joyful face.

Ugh, it's one of those freak clients.

Pulling back the covers, Rodimus swung his legs over the bed and stepped off. At first one leg gave way, but he caught himself on the nightstand.

"Whoa, whoa, easy now." Magnus stepped forward and reached out a large hand to catch Rodimus' arm, but instead he was slapped away.

"Mhng!!" Giving Magnus a bitter look and pulling his arm away, Rodimus gritted his teeth in frustration. He had to be obedient, if he wanted this over, he just had to go along with it and soon he would be back with the Masters. Not that that was any better.

Dampening his bitter look, he readjusted himself and stood on his own, waiting patiently for Magnus' lead so he could follow.

"This way." Stepping away from the bed and leading Rodimus outside of the room, he was surprised to find himself in what looked not to be a hotel, but an apartment. A rather nice one, well, not that he had been in many. It was rare that client had enough credits to bribe masters to let them bring stock home.

The carpet under his feet was soft, and the room itself had a warm glow. The shades had been opened and the soft glow of the sun spilt over the floor and a coffee table littered with books and papers. Well, not littered, they had been stacked perfectly, even the writing tools had been straightened perfectly alongside the paper.

"Rodimus." Not realizing he had paused and been staring, Rodimus turned and looked at Magnus. In his hands was a towel, soft and plush, and he handed it to him. "The washroom is right there, take as long as you like, alright?" The water here was warm, and would always be warm.

Looking from Magnus to the towel, then back up at Magnus, Rodimus studied his face. The usual sinister smile that clients harbored when wanting to watch him shower wasn't there, instead there was nothing but warmth. Sure Magnus had a small smile on his face but it seemed... different. Weird.

Taking the towel from Magnus' large hands, he stepped towards the washroom, expecting Magnus to follow closely behind.

Looking over his shoulder, he didn't see Magnus looming over him, instead the larger mech sat himself on the sofa and started to shuffle through his paperwork.

Returning his attention to the washroom, Rodimus stepped in and grabbed the door. Bringing it almost to a close, he left it open about a foot. Next, Rodimus just stood in the center of the room, the tip of his foot tapping on the cool tile as he took it in.

Just like the rest of the apartment, everything was nearly organized and perfectly placed. Hand towels that hung from the sink were aligned so perfectly Rodimus wondered if Magnus ever even used them.

Soaps and larger towels sat in a basket, organized by color and size, Rodimus noticed a few had been offset. No doubt Magnus had been in there earlier and had arranged them for him for easy access.

Taking the solvent bar and turning to the large open stall shower, Rodimus eyed the glass doors. There hadn't been a single spot or streak on the glass, and the tile shimmered below as he stepped in.

Turning the handle and tipping his head upwards, Rodimus offlined his optics and allowed the water that spurt from the shower head to pelt at his face.

Spoiler drooping, Rodimus took a deep breath and sighed into the water. It felt like heaven against his frame. Seeping into every nook and cranny, he flexed his armor, hoping it would run through his deeper wiring.

Dropping his head and letting the water spray at the back of his neck, Rodimus brought his hands up to his face and rubbed his tired optics. When he pulled his hands away, he glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see Magnus standing in the doorway watching him.

Nothing but steam wafted around the empty room, and the door remained the same distance closed as he had left it. In fact he could even see Magnus' shoulder from where he stood, still sitting

on the sofa, attention off of him.

Why isn't he watching me?

Clients never offered showers unless they wanted a personal show. There was no kindness ever, there was always a catch. Maybe he was waiting for him to drop his guard so he could pounce. More than one he had found himself pressed against the tiles, a spike forced through his valve, listening to the perverted grunts of his clients.

Scoffing, Rodimus bitterly rubbed the solvent bar over a face cloth, Rodimus scrubbed at his chipped armor. Neck, shoulders, arms, and carefully over his abdomen, he grit his denta as the cloth grazed over the weld.

He had lost count for how many times a new seal had been installed, perhaps more than a dozen. Each surgery weakened the armor that separated his protoform from his basic metal frame. The weld itself became more and more tender, having been sliced through so often with a laser scalpel, the metal was soft.

Finishing up and rinsing himself off, Rodimus turned the shower off and stepped out. Removing his towel from the sink and running it over his body, Rodimus looked up at the door once more.

Still Magnus wasn't peeping in at him; in fact he could hear him shuffling papers just outside the door. Had he really ignoring him that whole time? Why? Why was that?

Folding the towel and holding it until he found a hamper, Rodimus tossed it inside and stepped towards the door. He hesitated before grabbing the handle, and even then he wasn't sure he wanted to open it. It didn't really matter if he stayed in there or not, he would eventually have to leave.

Pulling the door open and stepping out into the living room where a holo screen TV was now playing the local news, Magnus turned and smiled at him

"Feeling better?" Magnus stood himself up, and he noticed Rodimus take a step back. Intimidated by his sheer size, Rodimus wasn't fond of large mechs towering over him.

Rodimus gave no answer, instead, his spoiler sagged and caught Magnus' eye. Still, the large dent in the golden metal was present. It must have ached, as that side of Rodimus' spoiler didn't flick upward as high as the other. In fact it twitched less often, barely moving.

"Does this hurt?" Reaching out to touch the top of the injured spoiler, Magnus noticed Rodimus lean away. Bright blue optics flared at the larger mech, and his vocalizer made a soft buzz and click. "What about this, what is this from?" Thick fingers suddenly touched the sides of Rodimus' abdomen, a little too close to the weld.

Slapping Magnus' hand away and snarling at him the best his vocalizer could allow, Rodimus bared his denta at him. He didn't have fangs like Decepticons, but his rabid optics told Magnus everything he needed to know.

"I'm sorry, I won't touch it." Rodimus' look didn't falter. Instead he kept beeping and clicking at Magnus, stopping when his vocalizer caught and he coughed. Wheezing, he turned away from Magnus, hacking into his hand until finally his intake settled.

Wiping drool from his mouth and adjusting his collar to fit more comfortably on his neck, Rodimus turned back to Magnus.

Just take me back already.

"Here," A glass of energon was in Magnus' hand. It glowed a faint blue, letting Rodimus know it was a medium grade, "please, just a little bit. You have to be hungry." As far as he knew Rodimus hadn't eaten since he had picked him up, and even a little bit of fuel was better than none.

Ignoring the glass and walking past Magnus, Rodimus walked over to the door and stood facing the wall. If he had no more use for him, then why wouldn't he just take him back? He was ready.

Not sure what to make of Rodimus, Magnus pulled the energon glass close to his chest and looked down inside of it. He swirled the liquid around and then set it down on the end table.

"Well, it's right here if you want it, alright?" Rodimus had his back to him, he might as well have had his forehead pressed against the wall he was so close to it. He gave no confirmation noise other than a single beep and his spoiler sagging into a more relaxed position.

If this newbie brings me back late the Masters will be upset.

Glancing out the window a moment to try and gauge what time it might be but he found it difficult. Having been locked in a windowless cell for weeks at a time, time itself seems to become irrelevant. All he knew was it must be mid morning by now, and that if he wasn't returned by noon he would be punished. Though that was if this Magnus fella hadn't persuaded his Masters with credit to keep him longer, and judging by how nice his home was, it was possible.

Bumping his forehead against the wall now, Rodimus waited.

Not once throughout the day did Magnus lay a hand on him, not even when it reached noon time and once more he pestered him about eating. Instead he stood a few feet away, giving him plenty of personal space.

He would hover a moment, energon in his hand, tilting the glass back and forth as if it would make him want it, but he never glanced at it. Stubborn, Rodimus continued to face the wall, occasionally shifting from foot to foot to get a little more comfortable. Even when Magnus told him he could sit on the sofa and that standing around like a drone wasn't necessary... he did anyway.

As he stood there, time progressed, and the sun after having been high in the sky began to sink. The lovely golden beams of sunlight that had based Rodimus nearly all day in his position had faded to a soft pastel pink, then a deep purple until finally the early night was upon them.

The collar around Rodimus' neck beeped softly, at this point he had grown so used to it he hadn't heard it anymore unless the alarm triggered, and that was only when a client brought him in late or if it was trying to be torn off. Considering the beeping remained stagnant, he confirmed Magnus had somehow managed to get him for a second night, great.

"Rodimus," Not realizing he had wandered off into the deeper parts of his own mind, Rodimus stood up straight. Blinking, he turned to face Magnus who again had energon in hand, "Hungry yet?" More than once throughout the day he had heard Rodimus' tank rumble and his spoiler twitch in response. He *was* hungry.

Optics half lit, Rodimus gave the glass a look and licked his lips but made no move for it. Instead he went to turn back towards the wall, pausing when Magnus reached out to touch him. He leaned away only an inch as Magnus halted his hand in mid air.

"Follow me." Coaxing Rodimus back around, Magnus stepped away from him and moved towards the hall.

Huffing, Rodimus followed obediently, he had too.

Following the larger mech past the washroom and past the room he had woken up in earlier in the day, they came to one more door at the end of the hall. Stepping in, Rodimus paused just behind Magnus as the larger mech pivoted on one foot and revealed a bed to him.

Of course, it had only been a matter of time before Magnus laid a hand on him. He wasn't any different than the rest, maybe he took a little more time, but they always had to have him.

"This is where you will sleep. I know it's not extravagant, but the bed is soft and the blankets are clean." Probably better than anything he had had before. Having spent the day putting the bed together in what once was his office, Magnus had cleared it out for the mech. It didn't matter that they wouldn't be at this location for long, it was more important Rodimus had a real bed to sleep in and not on the sofa. "Get some rest." Nodding his head down at Rodimus, Magnus stepped past him and left him alone.

What?

Turning as Magnus walked out, Rodimus watched him walk down the hall back into the living room. He waited a few seconds, then a minute, expecting Magnus to come back, but he heard the low drone of the holo screen and the shuffling of papers. Magnus was sitting again, working.

What's with this guy?

Stepping forward and touching the bed's soft covers, Rodimus' spoiler sagged. He rubbed back and forth slowly pausing when he felt his tank twist.

How many beds had he been on? Dozens, how many had he stained with energon and fluids not his own? How many times had the Crimson mech pinned him and torn his seal only to have it released? Too many.

Stepping away from the bed and moving into the corner, the weary red and gold mech knelt down. Getting to his hands and knees, he lowered himself to the floor, lying on his side. This is what he knew best, this was comfortable and safe. Beds these days offered too many painful opportunities for his memory to get the better of him. The chill of the hardwood would keep his mind occupied on staying warm and keep him asleep.

Pulling up the communication hub, Magnus waited as the spinning wheel signaled him the call was trying to go through. He stood at attention when the call picked up and a red and black mech appeared on screen.

"Perceptor," Bowing his head towards the screen, Magnus cleared his intake and continued,

"thank you for answering my call so late."

"Of course, was there something you needed from me?" Perceptor was standing, behind him his lab vaguely backlit.

"I found a mech, one of our own I think but he doesn't have an insignia. At this point I don't believe it really matters what side he was on considering what he has been through."

"What is that exactly?" Perceptor's scope moved downward slightly on his shoulder.

"I'm not sure of the extent myself, but as far as I could tell he was part of a sex slave trade, and for a while. He's in awful shape, won't even talk to me. There is a collar around his neck, pretty intricate design, I think his frame number is on it but removing it looks too complicated for me."

"Mhm, slavers," Perceptor's scope moved back up as he rubbed under his chin, "If you send me a scan of the device I might be able to figure something out but my knowledge on slaver equipment I'm afraid is limited. Plus, I'm nowhere near where you are and getting a chance to see it myself wouldn't be for a while. I'm going to assume it has some sort of tracking mechanism in it?"

"I assume so; I attached a scrambler to be safe."

"Good. I know Wheeljack is close to your location, and maybe if I can get ahold of Brainstorm I will send him your way. Wheeljack is your best bet right now to get an ID."

"I will ping him then, in the meantime can you check the archive for me for any ships that may have gone missing in this sector? Whoever I have they don't show up on Cybertron's missing persons list." Nodding, Perceptor cut the chat and left Magnus in the dark.

Bringing up his arm and typing into the small console, Magnus sent a direct message to Wheeljack, with luck he would respond and hopefully provide some answers. Rodimus belonged somewhere; maybe someone was looking for him, who knew exactly how long he had been subject to the slave trade tortures.

Dropping his arm by his side and wandering back down the hall to Rodimus' room, Magnus slowly opened the door and popped his head in. He was glad Rodimus had lain down, but he had hoped it would have been on the bed and not on the floor. His back was to him, his injured spoiler up in the air as he laid on his uninjured one.

How could he even sleep like that? Wasn't it stiff and cold down there?

Stepping in and closer to Rodimus, Magnus knelt down behind him. Reaching out, Magnus held his hand over Rodimus' head, wanting nothing more than to stroke it gently. How could he comfort him when he seemed so... blank? Every time he spoke to him he just stared, as if nothing more than a drone.

Curling his fingers into his palm, Magnus pulled his hand away and sighed. As much as he wanted to scoop the little mech up and set him in the much more comfortable bed, he couldn't. It was best to not touch him, not yet, at least not until he could get his point across to him that he really wasn't going to hurt him, but this little red mech was stubborn. At least there was that.

Standing, Magnus turned and pulled the blanket from the bed and gently draped it over Rodimus' frame. Doing his best to tuck Rodimus in without too much contact, he nodded at his work and left for just a brief moment.

Setting down a tray with two glasses of energon on it and a few biscuits, Magnus hoped that

tomorrow Rodimus would finally eat. His reserves had to be low, and the last thing he wanted was to force it. He just had to be patient, calm, and wait.

Chapter 4

A sharp pain dragged him from his slumber, forcing him to jerk back onto his side as his damaged spoiler fin throbbed without forgiveness. Having rolled on it in his sleep and squashing it between his back and the floor, the metal flexed, searing him and forcing him to sit up.

Something heavy draped down his frame, making him suddenly shiver as he realized he was warmer than usual.

“M-ssskk?” Vocalizer popping and fizzling as he grabbed the edges of the fuzzy blanket, Rodimus rubbed it between his fingers. He hadn’t remembered falling asleep with a blanket on, which meant that Magnus had wandered into the room at some point, which also meant-

Looking to either sides of himself, he spotted it, the tray of energon Magnus always had to leave him. This time, two glasses, and a few energon treats stacked one on top of the other in a little fan design.

RESERVES LOW

The words flashed across Rodimus’ HUD in bright red lettering, accompanied by the sickening twist of his empty tank begging him to drink it. More than anything he would have loved to have a sip, just enough to get the bells and whistles to stop screaming in his head but-

RESERVES LOW

Slapping his hand across the floor and swiping the glasses right off the tray, they flew across the room and shattered on impact against the wall. Glass and energon rained down onto the floor, and Rodimus turned his back to it while kicking the blanket off of himself.

“Rodimus?” A muffled voice suddenly sounded outside of the room, quickly followed by frantic footsteps and the loud creak of the door being yanked open. “Rodimus? Are you alright? I heard a noise.” Stepping just beyond the threshold, Magnus paused, spotting Rodimus sitting in the right hand cover of the room. At no point did he turn to look at Magnus when he called to him, instead he just nursed at his damaged spoiler fin.

Next to him was the upturned tray, and as Magnus looked to the other side of the room to see the shattered glass, he sighed. A part of him had expected this, but the better half of him had hoped perhaps Rodimus might have eaten, even if it was just a sip or a bite.

“Are you alright? Did you cut yourself?” Magnus’ voice was soft as he stepped closer to the little red mech. He paused about a foot away, not wanting to corner Rodimus and instead offered him his hand. “Here,” Uncurling massive fingers in a gesture to help the little mech up from the floor, Magnus waited, “Let me help you.” For the first time since Magnus had entered the room, Rodimus glanced over his shoulders at him. Locking optics for only a second, Rodimus looked down at the mighty hand being offered to him.

“Tss-sk.” Jerking his hand up and slapping Magnus’ hand away from him, Rodimus jerked himself upright onto his feet. He didn’t need this fake pity, of Magnus’ energon. When would the day would come to an end and he would be back with the Masters per two day contract and the nightmare would start again. There was no escape, not with the collar around his neck at least. The Master always knew where he was, and would always come find him. There was no place he could run or hide, they would find him.

Clients like Magnus were usual; those who liked to watch rather than touch, though it had been strange Magnus hadn't been doing much watching either. Though it hadn't really mattered how he got himself off, as long as he paid the Masters and they were happy, Rodimus had done his job.

Stepping past Magnus and moving towards the door, Rodimus hadn't gotten far before another searing pain had him staggering. Having to grab at the door frame to keep himself from stumbling over, he wrapped his free arm around his midsection and trembled.

What the-

The shock came again, twisting his tank into knots as the searing white pain radiated through his body. He hissed through clenched denta, digging his own fingers into his stomach as if it would help calm whatever was happening.

What's happening?

"Ng-Sszk-" What this pain? It certainly was no soreness derived from sleeping on the floor, and certainly not the lack of fuel. This had been more intense, to the point Rodimus watched his vision field glitch and twitch to static for only a mere moment. So much so his hand slid from the door frame to cover his mouth, afraid he might purge with little fuel he had left in his tank.

"Rodimus?" Watching the smaller mech stumble and brace himself on the door, he rushed to action. Without thinking, he placed a hand on Rodimus' shoulder and squeezed. "What's wrong?" He could see Rodimus' nose scrunching in agony, and his mouth wobble.

With coolant beaded on his forehead and denta clenched so tight they threatened to crack, the pain finally began to subside. Wave after wave they dulled, swirling back into his center and leaving him with nothing but a dull aching throb.

He hadn't noticed his knees had been shaking or his spoiler had dropped to its lowest point in mercy, but he had noticed the firm but gentle grip of Magnus' hand on his shoulder. Heavy fingers squeezing, trying to get his attention, and sure enough, they did.

"Nh—skkzzk!" Jerking his shoulder away from Magnus the moment he finally registered the contact, Rodimus finally stood himself back up. Ruffling his plating and taking in a deep but shaky breath, he sighed and pushed himself outward into the living area.

Following closely behind, Magnus watched the shaky hot rod walk across the room, half expecting him to stand facing the wall again, he had been surprised Rodimus actually stood by the window this time. Well, it was progress, even if small, Magnus was happier with that rather than him staring at walls.

"Rodimus," Despite knowing he wasn't going to get an answer, Magnus continued to speak, "If something is bothering you, I can help you." Rodimus' spoiler began to sink, the damaged side not sinking as low as the other. "You don't have to keep fighting like this. I'm just trying to help you." Nothing but silence followed between the two before Magnus just rubbed at the back of his neck and sighed. "I heard you whimpering in your sleep last night."

Around midnight, there had been a strange noise Magnus could hear through his wall. Having thought nothing of it for the first few minutes, he grew suspicious after it persisted. Considering the noise's origin was so close, it hadn't taken him long to pinpoint it was coming from the room Rodimus had been in.

Having cracked the door open just enough to sneak a peek inside, Magnus could see Rodimus lying on his side where he had left him. Every few seconds Rodimus' frame would shiver and that noise he had heard through the wall suddenly piped up from his body. Only a part of his head was visible, thanks to the soft glow of the energon glasses by his head, but still Magnus couldn't see his sleeping expression.

A soft whine, littered in static, and then a soft cough as Rodimus' vocalizer caught and scrambled. He would fall silent after a few minutes, seem to settle and relax, but then start again a little later. Each little cry seemed distressed despite their softness, nothing like simple sleep talk most mechs were bound to do in their lifetime.

It had left Magnus feeling helpless. Unable to touch him, unable to comfort him, all he could do was close the door and wait till morning. Rodimus would have to come around to him on his own time, but he was impatient.

By mid afternoon it had started to rain, and Rodimus had occupied himself by watching little droplets streak down the windowpanes. There had been something oddly relaxing about it, or at least the sound of the rain beating down against the building, leaving him feeling a bit better than he had in the early morning.

At no point had he budged from his spot by the window, only shifting from foot to foot every hour but nothing more. On occasion, he would flutter his spoiler, stretch it out and whine when the damaged side throbbed at his decision.

For most of the morning, he had managed to ignore whatever it was that Magnus had put himself to doing. More than once the larger mech came into the room, rushed about, stacked some papers as nearly as possible, and then moved off back into a side room. At no point though did Magnus ever close the door, making it available for Rodimus to enter if he needed to, which has unlikely but the silent offer was there.

It hadn't been until exactly noon time that Magnus tried to interact with him again, and no surprise he had another glass of energon. This time it was in a smaller cup and only filled half way. Perhaps he was learning, maybe not considering the cup was still glass and he was still offering it to a mech who didn't want it.

"It's going to be right here if you want it," Setting the glass down on the coffee table, Magnus brushed off his hands and put them on his hips, "If you don't want it try not to throw it across the room this time." He was surprised to see Rodimus glance over his shoulder and acknowledge, even if it was for a brief moment.

From there, Magnus returned to his business, leaving Rodimus to day dream until finally, around two, the doorbell rang.

Spoiler flapping upwards into place, Rodimus half turned to face the door, his spark suddenly pounding for the first time in the few days Magnus had picked him up.

Masters?

Have they come to collect him?

The doorbell rang again, and Rodimus felt the world shift under his feet. Slowly, he reached up and touched the collar around his neck, running the tips of his fingers over the little red button that flashed, letting anybody around know it was activated.

Taking a step back, he let his hand slip down and away from his collar, keeping his optics locked on the door as the bell rang for a third time.

What if-

Optics suddenly flickering, Rodimus felt a knot swell in his damaged intake. He had completely forgotten what day it was or could have been. Having been so wrapped up in Magnus' unusual client behavior, he forgot that by the end of each week the Crimson mech would come to collect them for their session.

Taking another step back only to feel himself bump into something much larger than himself, Rodimus whirled around. Having expected to see the burning red visor of the crimson mech, Rodimus was instead met with the cool blue optics of Ultra Magnus. Calm and concerned, they narrowed and focused on the hot rod's worried look.

"You're alright." Magnus allowed Rodimus to step back from him and watched him look around the room as if he had no idea where he had been. "It's just Wheeljack."

Wheel...jack?

Blinking himself back to reality, Rodimus watched Magnus step around him and move towards the door. He flipped only one lock before turning the knob and greeting the spunky mech before him.

"Wheeljack, it's good to see you again, though I wish it had been under better circumstances."

"Good to see you again too, Mags." Claspings their hands together for a brief shake, Magnus stepped to the side to allow the scientist inside.

"It's Magnus." Closing the door and flipping the latch, Magnus turned to see Wheeljack already advancing towards Rodimus. Advancing perhaps a little too fast as Rodimus backed himself into a corner and looked back and forth between Magnus and Wheeljack's prying optics.

"Hhn-ssk!" Spoiler dropping in submission, he tried to press himself even further into the wall than he already was. He was used to mechs getting into his personal space, but this guy, was just odd.

Hand on his chin, the finials at the sides of Wheeljack's head faded on and off in thought. For someone with no visible mouth, his eyebrows seemed strangely expressive, rising and falling as his optics examined every inch of Rodimus' armor that he could see.

"He's in pretty bad shape." He had expected to see a pretty banged up bot, but not this bad. Despite Magnus' effort to clean Rodimus up, his frame was still ragged. Paint had been scuffed away to show the silvery underside of Rodimus' base armor, and some cables could be seen sticking out from his seams. He was certainly a disaster, but a fixable one.

Optics moving down to the damaged spoiler, Rodimus stiffened in place and tried to dip it down further, hiding it behind his back.

Paying no mind to Rodimus' spoiler, Wheeljack instead brought his optics upon his belly. Plenty dented and scuffed, what really caught his attention was the massive and sloppy weld that had been carved there.

Attempting to reach out and touch it, his hand was snatched in mid air by a more massive hand.

"That's not a good idea," Releasing Wheeljack's hand, Magnus cleared his intake, "Sorry for grabbing." Staring at Magnus over Wheeljack's shoulder, Rodimus seemed surprised. "He needs some space, just give him some room." Together, Magnus and Wheeljack stepped away from the corner, allowing Rodimus to straighten up and step forwards.

"Right, I forget I can get ahead of myself," Turning back to Rodimus and setting his hands on his hips, Wheeljack cocked his head slightly to one side. "How about I get a look at that crazy contraption around your neck, hmm?"

Despite Wheeljack making no move towards Rodimus, he felt his nerves rising once more. The collar itself was sensitive, why were they interested in it. If they toyed with it too much and tried to pull it off it would kill him.

Stepping back once more, Rodimus shook his head.

"It's alright Rodimus." Voice as soft and gentle as he could possibly make it, Magnus raised his hands to Rodimus, trying to coax him to relax. "He's not going to hurt you, I promise."

"You know, I expected him to be a little more excited to get the thing off." Crossing his arms and allowing Magnus to step between him and Rodimus, Wheeljack just shrugged.

Off?

"He doesn't know we're trying to get it off."

"What?" Dropping his hands, Wheeljack just stared at the back of Magnus' head until he turned around. "You haven't... but... Mags, you and I need to have a talk when this is done."

Off?

As Magnus moved back behind Wheeljack, the scientist once again moved towards Rodimus. This time he was slow, keeping at least a foot away from the damaged hot rod and showing him his hands before reaching out.

"I'm going to touch your neck." His hands paused in mid air as Rodimus leaned back. He could hear his fans clicking on and the abrupt soft pants to what would become hyperventilation if he wasn't quick. "Just hold still." That had been easier said than done, hands advancing on his neck wasn't exactly something he was fond of.

Freezing the moment Wheeljack's finger tips touched the edges of the collar; Rodimus felt his breath catch in his intake. He hadn't realized he had clenched his fists until his palms ached, and despite trying to relax them, they were stiff.

"You're alright." Optics tearing away from a section of the far wall he had locked onto, Rodimus made contact with Magnus, standing closely behind Wheeljack. "You're fine."

He could feel delicate fingers working around the collar, testing how much room he had between Rodimus' neck and the metal. Then came a light tug, and Rodimus panicked.

Perhaps Magnus could tell just by his face or the fact that his spoiler had started to rattle so hard against his back it jingled, but he stepped closer and continued to coo to him.

“You’re fine.”

“Such an interesting design,” Putting a finger under Rodimus’ chin and slowly guiding him up a bit to get a better look, Wheeljack hummed in delight. He probably shouldn’t have, but he seemed a little pleased with the collar’s intricate lock mechanism. “It’s certainly something I can get off.”

“Good. How long will it take?” Continuing to watch Wheeljack work, Magnus watched him pause on the little scrambler he had installed.

“Well, it’s not something I can get off now. I need to take a scan of it and study it a little more but maybe a week, two at the most. The cables connecting each lock are fascinating, each one no doubt having its own code. Doing them out of order can cause his neck cables to tangle and tear and just pulling it off does the same thing. It will take me a while to figure them all out and in the right order, but it’s something I can do. You’ll just have to wait a bit longer. But,” Raising a finger to Magnus and wagging it in front of his face, “I can do this today.” Dropping his hands away from Rodimus neck and taking a step back, Wheeljack raised his arm towards Rodimus and allowed his HUD to scan from his head down to his collar. “With a few little blocks and barricades... boom,” Wheeljack closed his arm panel after pressing a green button, “no longer tractable!” Setting his fists onto his hips and raising his head high in victory, Wheeljack’s own back finials flapped. “You won’t need this one anymore.” Holding out the little scrambler Magnus had installed on Rodimus when he first found him, he crushed it in his palm.

“Are you sure it will work?”

“Mags, come on, who do you take me for?”

“Right,” There was no need to doubt Wheeljack’s ability; he was one of the best, “thank you.” Bowing his head slightly, Magnus glanced to the side to see Rodimus slowly slinking away from the two of them to hide back in his spot by the window. “You said you had something to talk to me about?”

“That’s right.”

“Come then, I can make us some energon and we can talk.”

“He won’t speak to me,” Handing Wheeljack a glass of energon, Magnus leaned himself back against the counter. Not looking up when the scientist snapped his mask back and took a sip, Magnus just swirled his own glass around. Not really thirsty, he set the glass on the counter and looked up to see Wheeljack just staring at him.

He had seen Wheeljack with his mask back before, even if it was rare, it still surprised him to know Wheeljack actually hid quite a handsome face underneath.

“It’s not surprising.” Taking another small sip of his energon, Wheeljack scratched under one of his glowing finials.

“What do you mean?”

“Listen Mags, you’re a nice guy and all, but you freaking suck at being a people person. You don’t know how to get your point across to the average person. You’re so used to soldiers falling in line just because you say so.” Setting his empty glass down, Wheeljack continued. “You can’t just expect him to understand.”

“But I have told him that he is safe, he won’t believe me.” That had been expected at first, but he was sure he had made his home safe. He had been sure there was nothing that could threaten him there, and yet he was so stubborn.

“Mags, just try to be a little more Magnus, and not *Ultra* Magnus.”

“I’m trying but-” Staring down into his energon again, Magnus only shook his head.

“Do you know how long he has been in the trade?”

“No, but I assume it’s been awhile, considering his body’s condition and the way they spoke about him. Though a definite timeline, I am unsure, he won’t speak to me.”

“Judging from what I saw around his neck, his vocalizer might be missing. The cables are heavily damaged, some even are open and exposed. I can repair them when though when the collar comes off, but you need to keep them clean. It’s not uncommon for this thing to happen in the slave trade.”

“But he makes noise.”

“Hm?” Wheeljack’s head tilted to the side.

“He whimpers at night and some nights he can get sounds out, nothing solid though.”

“Perhaps his vocalizer is just damaged then. I’ll look into a replacement then if that is the case. By the time I can get the collar off he should be in a lot better shape than you found him.”

“That will be good then, maybe he can tell us where he is from, if he even remembers. Or anything at all about what happened. I want to take care of him.” Any information to help them shut down the slave trades was always helpful, especially from those who suffered in it. Though it seemed impossible to shut down the trade completely with how vast it was among the galaxy, one less in the sector was better than nothing. “I don’t want him to be afraid anymore. I don’t want him to be afraid or go hungry, but he is... no matter what I try.”

“I think he’s in good hands Mags. Good clean hands.” Winking as his mask snapped back over his face, Wheeljack rubbed his stomach and sighed.

The door to the kitchen hadn’t been completely closed, leaving just enough space through the crack for Rodimus to peep in. Having to keep himself low from being spotted, he could only make out Wheeljack’s and Magnus’ legs from under the table.

I want to take care of him.

Rodimus’ spoiler twitched and he listened on, keeping the only optic he could peep through

the door locked onto Magnus' feet.

I don't want him to be afraid anymore.

Leaning back away from the door and sitting against the wall, Rodimus felt a strange tugging sensation in his chest. It swelled and wrapped around his spark, squeezing it. What a strange sensation, something he wasn't familiar with, or at least had forgotten what it had meant. It had left a knot in his intake, forcing him to swallow a few times before it finally went down.

He... doesn't really mean that. He's like... all the rest. He has to be... nobody would...

Face suddenly scrunching in agony at the unannounced flare of pain, Rodimus jerked back against the wall.

Like earlier in the morning, the pain had been searing hot as it sliced through his midsection. Radiating up through his spinal strut and down to his hips, he felt like he might as well have been tearing in two.

"NH-sSSk!" Pushing back off the wall and struggling to get to his feet, he had accidentally bumped the kitchen door, closing it. "AH-szzk!" He hadn't been able to stay on his feet for more than two steps, knees giving out and succumbing to the torture.

Crashing down into his hands and knees, he wrapped one arm around his midsection and squeezed. Terrified that something was inside of him trying to get out, he opened his mouth to scream, only emitting a few soft pops and beeps before the kitchen door opened.

"Rodimus what are you-" Spotting the red and gold mech on the floor, Magnus rushed to his side. As he was about to place his hands over Rodimus' back and shoulder, he paused, not sure what to do. "Rodimus what's wrong? What happened?" He could see Rodimus' mouth open, and his expression read as if he was yelling, but he was silent.

Watching on from behind, Wheeljack rubbed the underside of his chin and hummed.

"Rod-" The moment Magnus set his hand down on Rodimus' back, he got the reaction he had been expecting. A gold hand slapped away his comforting one, but instead of a dirty look this time, Rodimus' optics seemed to plead to him.

Trembling in place, Rodimus' frame suddenly settled and he panted into the floor boards. He could feel Magnus touching his back again, and being too tired to slap him off again, he allowed it.

"Rodimus, please-" The golden mech slipped out from under him, slowly crawling back over to the window and sitting by it. He huffed, spoiler dropping and hitting the floor as he rested his hot cheek against the cool window pane.

"See what I mean?" Magnus spoke softly as he stood and looked at Wheeljack.

"Mmm." Staring at Rodimus by the window for a few seconds more, Wheeljack held out his hand waited for Magnus to shake back. "I'll get started on the collar schematics when I get to the lab. If anything changes, you have my number. Remember, try to keep his neck cables clean, I have no doubt you will be able to handle that. I'll ping you when I have more information."

"Of course. Thank you for stopping by, Wheeljack."

"No problem, Mags." Winking, Wheeljack made his exit, leaving Magnus standing in the

middle of the room and Rodimus once again by the window.

Tugging at his own servos for a brief moment, Magnus looked down at the coffee table to the still full glass of energon and sighed. Taking it into one hand, he stepped over to Rodimus and knelt down to get level with the little red and gold mech. Waiting patiently for Rodimus to look at him, he tried to soften his face as much as possible.

“Rodimus, listen to me,” He paused, taking note that Rodimus’ cheeks were flushed and sweaty, “You really are safe here. I’m not bringing you back to that awful place. You don’t have to face the wall, or sleep on the floor, you can have the warm bed. You can eat, you don’t have to be afraid of getting punished. I pretended to purchase you, but I’m not bringing you back ever. I’m here to help you, you’re free.” Watching Rodimus’ optics flick back and forth between each of Magnus’, the larger mech just shook his head. “So please, eat something. I know your reserves must be getting low. Even if it’s just a sip.” He didn’t want to have to force him, Rodimus didn’t seem like his mind had been broken from his captivity, he was just fearful of whatever might happen with the result of eating.

Setting the glass down next to Rodimus’ pronged feet, Magnus said no more. Simply reaching out to touch Rodimus’ shoulder in a caring gesture, he stopped when the golden mech leaned away. Though leaning away a lot slower than he had in the past, Magnus retracted his hand and turned away from him. He had been through enough today, he might as well let him be.

Watching Magnus enter his office, Rodimus waited for a few minutes before looking down at the energon glass. Still only half full, the fluid glowed brightly, making his tank twist with need.

Licking his lips, he looked up again at the door, half expecting Magnus to be spying on him, but instead the hallway was empty.

Is he telling the truth?

Reaching out for the glass, Rodimus wrapped unstable fingers around it.

What if he’s just trying to get my guard down. Resell me to new Masters?

Pressing the rim of the glass against his lips, he took a single sip.

Chapter 5

Despite the day's effort, Magnus had been disappointed he had found Rodimus once again lying on the floor. With his back to the door, Rodimus was curled up in his usual spot in the room Magnus had given him. How he could fold himself into such a small shape to fit in the last amount of space possible, Magnus wasn't sure, but somehow he managed it each time. It had also been frustrating to see Rodimus ignoring the blankets and pillows he had been provided. Opting rather to sleep on the cold wood floor with nothing but himself as comfort made Magnus spark sink.

With a sigh of disappointment, Magnus had crept his way into the room and pulled the blanket from the floor. Giving it one good flap to spread it out, he draped it over Rodimus' frame and pulled it just over his shoulder. Doing his best to tuck Rodimus in without touching him too much, Magnus stood and moved himself back into the living area.

The sun had sank far beyond the horizon line at this point, leaving the living area dark, leaving nothing but the flickering holo screen to illuminate the small space. With the volume lowered to all but a whisper, Magnus had been left in near silence.

The holo screen flickered brighter as a commercial played, and Magnus found his optics being drawn to the energon glass resting on the corner of the small table as it caught some of the light.

Optics narrowing and rotating, Magnus stepped closer to it, picking it up and examining it carefully. There had been something different about it, and it took him a few seconds to realize the energon level he had poured was lower than what he had originally put into it. That and the fact there was a small smudge on the rim of the glass, indicating lips had touched it.

He drank some.

Turning to face Rodimus' room, Magnus felt his spark flutter behind his chestplate and the corners of his mouth suddenly perk up. Sure Rodimus hadn't drank the whole thing, maybe only a sip or two, but it was progress. Perhaps not as much as Magnus had hoped, but none the less, Rodimus was eating.

In fact, the moment Wheeljack had left Magnus had noticed Rodimus starting to act strange. Well, perhaps not strange, maybe *normal*. Now that he was thinking about it, he had noticed Rodimus seemed a little more mobile through the apartment. Ratchet than standing by the door all day facing the wall, he had actually moved about the room. Not that it had been much of an improvement, as Rodimus never left the room and entered another. Despite sometimes hovering by Magnus' office door, he never stepped in.

He hadn't noticed at first how often Rodimus would gawk in at him, curious as to what he had been up to. With his back to him as he worked, he hadn't been sure just how long or how often he had done it, but what he did know is that when he finally did notice Rodimus, it startled the hot rod. As if caught doing something he wasn't supposed to, his spoiler would bounce up and he would jump in place, quickly vanishing from the door. Only when Magnus hadn't perused him did he return to peeping in a few minutes later. Of course, by this point Magnus had made an effort to look over his shoulder, seeing part of Rodimus' face peeking past the door frame and the long golden end of his spoiler. Hiding back against the wall when he was spotted again, Magnus only smiled. There had been something cute about the way Rodimus would zip back around the corner, and then slowly peek back.

Eventually, each time Magnus glanced over his shoulder Rodimus had appeared less and less.

Eventually he glanced over and hadn't seen the red mech gawking in, no doubt finally having his fill of watching whatever it was Magnus had been doing.

Though, by this point, Magnus had become curious as to what Rodimus had been doing. Deciding he might do a little spying of his own, Magnus pushed himself back from his chair and stood.

As quietly as his massive feet would allow, he crept to the door and paused just before the threshold, listening. He couldn't hear any sort of movement, only the soft droning of the holo screen playing on the wall. With no indication of movement, Magnus had figured Rodimus must have been standing by the wall again.

When he leaned around the corner to get a look into the living room, he had been pleasantly surprised to catch Rodimus watching the holo screen. He had never seen him even glance at it, let alone stand in front of it and direct his full attention to it.

It had taken Magnus a moment to figure out it had been a commercial about fresh paint jobs and all the local areas to get a fresh coat applied. Waxing, buffing, calibrating sensor networks, it was certainly a place to be pampered.

He hadn't thought anything of it until Rodimus shifted, looking down at his hands and turning them over to look at his scuffed palms. At some point in his life they had been a beautiful golden color, but now they were nothing but mustard like gray. In fact, his entire frame seemed a strange offset gray, as if the life itself had been sucked from him.

Clenching his hands into tight fists, Rodimus had let them fall to his sides, his spoiler once again sagging down to its lowest point behind him.

As the commercial came to an end, Magnus' watched as Rodimus' frame rose and fell with a sigh. He turned slowly, trudging down the hall to his designated room and entering it without glancing towards Magnus' office, having no idea he had been watched. From there he had laid down in his usual spot on the floor, leaving Magnus to cover him with a blanket and find the drinking glass, leaving him in his present location.

Running a dish towel over the glass and setting it down by the side of the sink, Magnus carefully folded the towel and set it aside.

Heading back into the living room and picking up the remote for the holo screen, Magnus paused just before turning it off, seeing the commercial for the paint job replaying. Having watched it long enough to see several body shop locations listed, Magnus' optics narrowed on one not too far from the apartment. In fact, it was located in the town's market district.

Maybe a trip into town with Rodimus would perk him up, maybe even get him to open up a little more if he were to take him for a paint job estimate. There had been no doubt in his mind he could afford to have Rodimus primed and painted. The only thing that made him grit his teeth was the fact Rodimus' collar might get in the way, or at least raise some questions.

Regardless, getting Rodimus out would do him some good. Keeping him cooped up like some sort of caged animal wouldn't do him any good. Plus, who knew when Rodimus had actually been outside, or at least, fully aware that he was outside.

With a soft grunt and a nod, Magnus made a mental note that tomorrow he would take Rodimus into town. Together they would look for the paint shop and gather a few more supplies for the apartment. With luck, it might just warm Rodimus up to him a little more.

“Nhn-” Audio receptors suddenly perking up as a sound broke through the silence, Magnus turned towards its direction. “Mhzzk-” It came from Rodimus’ room, and Magnus had recognized the familiar pop and click of Rodimus’ vocalize. Or at least, Rodimus’ vocalizer’s sad attempt to whimper.

Moving himself back towards Rodimus’ room, Magnus paused just outside the door. Like always, Rodimus slept with his back to him, though the blanket he had draped over him had been kicked off and laid limply over Rodimus’ feet.

Spoiler down and quivering, Rodimus had managed to crunch himself into a fetal position. Arms tucked protectively against his chest, he hunkered further into himself and tried once more to whimper, only getting a loud beep and click from his vocalize.

He settled for a moment, then kicked one leg out frantically and rolled himself over. Once again he hunkered into himself, his distressed expression now in Magnus’ sights.

With his nose scrunched and his mouth wobbling, Rodimus’ face was clearly distressed. At no point did it settle, even when his body relaxed, the perpetual frightened expression never faded.

Entering the room and kneeling down by Rodimus’ front, Magnus let his hands come to a rest on his own thighs. Once again he hesitated with the thought of touching the smaller mech, but yet he looked so distressed. Not being able to comfort him in turn distressed him, and he fanned out the fingers on one large hand. Curling and uncurling them as he tried to figure out what to do, he extended his palm, hovering it over Rodimus’ cheek.

Face scrunching, Rodimus tried to whimper again, suddenly coughing as his vocalize caught and glitched.

Carefully, and not without a large amount of caution, Magnus let his hand come to rest against Rodimus’ cheek. Caressing it and very gently massaging his fingertips into the soft mesh, he rubbed back and forth. Tracing up along his cheek and down along his chin, Magnus found himself stroking a few seams along Rodimus’ head. Toying with the jagged armor tips, he rubbed them between massive servos.

“Shh,” He cooed as softly as his vocalize would allow, “shh.” Cheek warm in his hand, perhaps too warm, Magnus continued to sooth him. Running his hand up to rub at the offset yellow chevron, he watched the hot rod’s face soften. His scrunched nose relaxed and his mouth stopped wobbling, and for the first time since he had arrived, he looked a bit at peace. Despite his rugged look and his scuffed little cheeks, he was calm, content even.

Shifting, Rodimus mumbled, coughing again as his vocalize refused to process the noise. Settling, he cuddled closer to the massive palm, relaxing once more.

Halting his gentle rubs, Magnus started down at Rodimus, taking in his slightly pink cheeks and all his little features for the first time. Even in such a banged up state, he was something beautiful.

With his free hand, Magnus reached downward and tugged the blanket back up Rodimus’ frame. At first he had thought about picking him up and placing him on the bed, but the chances of him waking up and panicking were too high. It would be better to leave him where he was, for now at least.

Stroking Rodimus’ cheek with the back of his finger’s one last time, Magnus slowly extracted his hand. Before pulling it away completely, he found himself pressing the back of his hand to

Rodimus' forehead.

As he had thought, it was warm, warmer than he would have liked it to be. Though perhaps it might have just been a cold, or a reaction to not being drugged, he wasn't sure. Regardless, he made a note to himself to pick up some medicine at the market. Though the follow up thought of how Rodimus might feel about taking something crossed his mind. He wouldn't expect him to be too keen on the idea of drugs of any form after what he had seen. Perhaps he could mix it into some energon? Even if Rodimus only drank a few sips a day at least it was something.

Removing his hand from Rodimus' cheek and making sure he had tucked him into the best of his ability, Magnus allowed himself to stand. Creeping towards the door, he grabbed the knob and bought the door all but to a close. Peeping through the crack, he gave Rodimus one last glance before finally turning towards his own room.

He hadn't realized how late it was until he felt the weight of recharge on his shoulders. It had been a long day, and longer days were no doubt to come. No matter, he would be ready for it and anything to come, for Rodimus' sake. At what point this little side mission had become a bit more than just a *side* mission to keep himself occupied on vacation, he wasn't sure, but that didn't matter either. What mattered now was Rodimus and only *Rodimus*.

He had expected to see a tray of energon and biscuits in front of his face when his optics flickered to life, but instead the floor in front of him was bare. No tray, no glass, nothing, and for the first time Rodimus actually felt disappointed. Though he couldn't really blame the big guy, he had smashed several glasses and wasted quite a bit of energon, perhaps he had learned.

Sitting himself up and tilting his head towards the door, he listened closely. Strange, normally he could hear Magnus clomping about by this hour... whatever hour it happened to be. Even then, he couldn't hear the holo screen playing the usual weather report either, and that too was odd.

Haling himself to his feet and stretching, Rodimus' spoiler quivers behind his back and settled as he stepped towards the door. Grabbing the handle, he leaned forwards and pressed the side of his head to the wood, once again listening for any sort of movement. When his sensors picked up nothing, he pulled the door open with an annoying creak.

The living room was quiet and bare, nothing but the warm sunlight splashing over the furniture to give the room a warm glow. Every chair Rodimus had expected to see Magnus sitting in was bare, including his office that he had peeked into as he made his way to the center of the room.

A loud snort seemed to catch Rodimus off guard, making him jump in place and whirl around to face what he recognized as Magnus' bedroom door. Not quite closed completely, the crack allowed another snort and sigh to pass through.

Peering through the gap in the door, Rodimus' optics narrowed and rotated, adjusting to the rooms low light. Almost immediately he saw Magnus' large outline. Frame covered in that massive comforter, it rose and fell with each harsh breath.

Stepping back and away from the door, Rodimus paused about two feet away, still listening to Magnus' soft snorts. For a mech as large as him he had expected him to be... louder. Though it seemed to suit his nature that even in recharge he was calm and collected.

Turning around and letting his optics wander over the room, Rodimus found himself loafing about. He had never had the chance to really *look* at the place, having spent most of his time getting to know every little crack in the wall by the front door. With Magnus still asleep, perhaps he could snoop a little.

The bookshelf was the first thing he moved towards, immediately standing on the tips of his toes to see the book hidden on the higher shelves. It hadn't come to a surprise to him that the books were all the same size and color, stacked in a perfect row and in alphabetical order. From what he could read from the spines, at least the ones that were not worn away, they had something to do with law. Uninteresting, at least to him, and the shelf below the one he was inspecting hailed the same boring result. Law, rules, codes of conduct, nothing fun to be found.

Huffing and stepping back from the shelf, Rodimus turned his attention to coffee table. There hadn't been much on it to interest him other than one of two magazines and what he had to guess was mail. Often he would see Magnus reading the morning paper, and when he was done he would fold it in a neat rectangle and set it down neatly with the rest of the mail. On occasion Rodimus would try to read the front headline, finding even the news around these parts was uninteresting.

Pulling out one of the side drawers, Rodimus' spoiler sagged at the discovery of a few batteries and the remote for the holo screen. It really shouldn't have surprised him that Magnus' home was just as dry as his personality.

Tank twisting and letting out a low rumble, Rodimus brought his hand up and gave the wrinkled metal that made up his midsection a light rub. Delicate over the metal weld, he turned towards the kitchen and moved to it.

Ever since taking a few sips of energon the day before, his tank had been a little more vocal than usual about getting more. He had grown used to the tight squeeze and ache of hunger, but the grumbling noise he hadn't heard in a long time. It was awkward to hear in the silence, and certainly would make hiding his needs from Magnus more difficult if it kept speaking up when he was around.

Much like the rest of the apartment, the room had been dark. Nothing but two narrow windows above the sink permitted a bit of sunlight to fall through. It was oddly peaceful, and almost immediately Rodimus spotted the empty energon glass by the sink as the sun glinted off of it.

"Mhzzsk-" Taking the glass in hand, Rodimus looked to his right, then his left and spotted the fridge. Again, his tank rumbled, and he licked his lips while stepping forwards. Reaching out and grabbing the handle, he was right about to pull it open when a loud shrieking noise startled him.

Glass slipping from his hand and shattering by his feet, he jumped back. The noise persisted at a strange pattern, and by the time Rodimus had spun around several times searching for its source did he realize it was an alarm clock. Slightly muffled by the far wall, it continued to ring until a sudden loud *thump* silenced it.

He's awake.

Whirling back towards the fridge and looking at the floor where the glass had been dropped, Rodimus panicked at all the little pieces.

The muffled *thump-thump* of Magnus' feet hitting the floor had the hot rod jumping once more. Now scrambling, he hunched down and tried as quickly as possible to pick up the pieces. Though once he had a few in his palm, he wasn't sure what to do with them next.

Magnus' heavy frame could be heard moving through the hall, and in mere seconds he would be in there with him.

Dropping the glass shards back onto the floor and standing himself upright, Rodimus kicked the glass under the fridge. Using the prongs on the tips of his feet to scoot the glass as far back and as out of sight as possible, he nearly jumped out of his armor when he heard Magnus' voice.

"Rodimus," Voice groggy, Magnus cleared his intake, "I wasn't expecting you to be up so early." His bulky frame seemed to perk up as if delighted to see him. In truth he had been, not seeing Rodimus laying in the corner sulking pleased him greatly.

Having whirled around and pressed his back against the fridge the moment Magnus walked in, Rodimus continued to use his foot to scoot glass under the fridge as subtly as possible.

"Are you hungry?" He noticed Rodimus suddenly move away from the fridge and lean against the far counter. Spoiler down and flat against his back, Rodimus kept flicking his optics down to the floor and then back up to an oblivious Magnus. "Did you sleep alright?" Grabbing the handle to the fridge and yanking it open, Magnus removed the first cube of energon on the shelf and set it down on the counter.

Moving towards the sink, Magnus paused and started for a second. Puzzled, he hummed to himself in thought as he could have sworn he had left a glass there the night before.

"I was thinking," Reaching up and into a cabinet, Magnus removed two new glasses, looking it over for any spots before bringing it to the center island, "maybe we could go out today." Poking a large finger through the top of the energon cube, Magnus didn't notice Rodimus staring, swallowing hard at the sudden *pop*.

Filling both glasses about half way, Magnus handed Rodimus his, noticing right away that Rodimus didn't reach for it. Instead he looked from the glass to Magnus' face, unsure, but after a moment, he took it. Holding it in both hands, he just tucked it close to his chest, making no move to drink.

"It's a bit of a walk, but there is a market in the center of town," turning and putting the energon back into the fridge, Magnus continued, "I figured since it's going to be a nice day today, maybe we could take a walk?" Not seeing Rodimus quickly suck down a few sips from his glass, Magnus closed the fridge and turned to him. "I don't want to keep you cooped up in here. My home isn't meant to be a prison. I meant what I said yesterday." Taking his own energon glass in hand, Magnus took a small sip from it and licked his lips.

He had been hesitant at first to take Rodimus outside when his collar was still active, afraid someone might pick up on it if at any point his signal block stopped working. Though with Wheeljack having made sure the collars tracer was offline, he had felt better. Though there was also the initial fear Rodimus might also try to *run*. That fear had faded significantly the more Magnus had seen Rodimus warm up to him, even if the progression was slow.

Picking at the top of his glass, Rodimus let his optics wander away from Magnus, unsure about it all. Sure the prospect of going outside seemed nice, but outside there were dangers he wasn't interested in facing. He had accepted the fact he was *safe* inside of Magnus' walls, but outside of them...

The Masters could be watching.

Outside the walls where he could be seen, by possible clients who had taken him before, by

organics who had their hands all over him. Perhaps even by Masters who were looking for new Stock. He had to have been gone long enough for them to notice Magnus wasn't fair on his side of the bargain. They would be looking for him, and since he was a Premium stock member, he was valuable enough that they *would* search for him until they found him. Then again he wasn't at all sure how far Magnus had taken him from that awful place. They could have quantum leapt far enough that he would never be found, or simply drifted a few solar systems. It ate away at him to know just outside the door a Master might be waiting to drag him back and force him to bare himself to whoever wanted him.

The glass in Rodimus' hand cracked and energon trailed down between his shaking fingers. It had pulled him from his thoughts, and his spoiler flapped up in surprise. His mouth opened as if to gasp but no noise came out.

"It's alright," Magnus was there in front of him, taking the glass from him with one large hand and setting it into the sink, "It's just a glass." As if he could read the fear in Rodimus' optics, he offered up a tender smile.

Well, he tried to, a smile didn't seem to fit on the huge silver face no matter which way he curled his lips. It looked awkward and somewhat forced, but still it seemed genuine. It somehow eased the hot rod, and his spoiler fell to his sides once more as he relaxed.

"We will have to do something about the collar though," Tapping at his chin in thought, Magnus stared, "I don't have any tech that will conceal it, but I think I might-" Cutting himself off while walking from the kitchen, Rodimus perked his head up as he heard a bit of rustling, "Ah, this should work nicely." Reentering the room with something soft and long in his hands, Magnus presented Rodimus with green scarf.

Squinting, Rodimus looked up at Magnus with the most unamused look he could possibly get his face to make.

You can't be serious.

Oh he was very serious as he was already wrapping it loosely around Rodimus' neck. Adjusting it to hide the collar the best it could, Magnus stepped back and confirmed it would work.

"Don't give me that look," Stepping back and giving Rodimus a quick look over, Magnus crossed his arms, "It's only temporary." Hopefully Wheeljack would get back to him sooner rather than later and they could get the collar off by the end of the week.

Fine.

"Nnsszzk-" Slouching a bit, Rodimus rolled his optics and accepted his fate. It really wasn't *that* bad anyway., at least it was soft. "Kkzzk."

He had been hesitant to step outside of the apartment, pausing just before the threshold and jumping forward when Magnus coaxed him out. Having waited patiently behind the larger mech while he locked the door, Rodimus looked up and down the halls.

He hadn't ever even *seen* the hall, or even what the outside of the building had looked like. He could make out a part of it from the window he had stared out if in Magnus' living room, but it

hadn't been enough to give him a picture of the entire building. What he did know was they were perhaps fifteen floors or more up, and that the inner halls were relatively quiet. Painted a soft orange with only a few pieces of wall art to take up space, it was relatively quiet.

As they walked down the hall towards the elevator, Rodimus could hear movement in the other units. Soft talking, the news playing, even music. Wherever they were it wasn't some slum house he had been used to or a hotel he had so often found himself waking in. It was a real, genuine, living area.

The elevators soft *ding* startled Rodimus enough that Magnus turned and smiled at him, reassuring him he was alright.

"Come on," Stepping into the shaft, Magnus held the door so it wouldn't close on Rodimus, waiting for him to take his place by his side, "have you ever been inside of an elevator?" Releasing the door as Rodimus stepped in and stood, Magnus watched his gaze suddenly wander.

Probably. Maybe. I don't really know. Never really knew how I ended up anywhere.

He shrugged, and Magnus made no effort to push the subject. Instead, they rode quietly, bouncing lightly in place as the elevator reached the bottom floor. This time the soft ding didn't startle Rodimus, and they both stepped off.

The front lobby was well lit, sun pouring through the large glass windows to the front of the building, leading to a revolving door that Magnus avoided. Instead, he moved to the push doors, holding it open for Rodimus who stepped by.

Immediately, the sun stung at his optics, causing him to flutter them closed and turn his head away and down. Slowly, he lifted it back up, blinking rapidly as he tried to adjust to the light.

As he looked up, a large shadow cast itself over his frame, and as his optics rotated and narrowed, he could see Magnus holding his hand above his head, blocking the sun.

"Take your time." He heard Magnus say, no doubt referring to his optics calibrating to the light. It certainly took longer than usual, but by the time Rodimus' optics had finally reset and accepted the new light, he blinked out at the world in surprise.

The mechs walking across the sidewalk were not blurry, nor was the street or any of the buildings around him. He could hear everything clearly, every acceleration from the mechs on the roads, to every screech of brakes at the stop sign at the end of the street. Everything was clear.

"Come on," Magnus waves Rodimus on, starting to walk down one side of the sidewalk, "the market is this way. We should reach it in twenty minutes by foot." It was only a five minutes drive, but Magnus wasn't sure Rodimus could transform with the collar on and wouldn't risk it. Walking was just fine.

Not moving from his spot in front of the apartment complex, Rodimus looked from Magnus to the other side of the street. It was empty, and it was his chance to run to freedom if he wanted it. With no leash to tether him to Magnus, and with the collar supposedly offline... he could run. He could run and he could never look back for the rest of his life. It was right there, *freedom*.

But was that freedom safe?

Pulling on his fingers, Rodimus looked back and forth once more, then turned on his heel and rushed to Magnus' side.

His spark fluttered the moment he had seen Rodimus' optics lighten up at the sight of the market. He found it oddly adorable when Rodimus wiggled his spoiler in wonder at the bustling square. It flapped upwards at attention when he turned to face a few shop stands, interested in them, then more to his other side. Already Magnus would see him getting overloaded with excitement to explore, and it pleased him greatly.

"Rodimus," He hadn't quite gotten the little mechs attention, as it seemed to continue to wander over the shops, "Roddy-" Turning, Rodimus looked up at Magnus, his expression quizzical. "I have something I want to show you."

Roddy?

Without hesitation, the hot rod trailed behind Magnus as he moved forward through the crowd. Sticking close to him, perhaps a little too close as he pressed himself against Magnus' back when the crowd became a little too much, Rodimus allowed the massive mech to guide him.

"Should be just around here," Turning slightly, Magnus stopped abruptly, "Ah, here it is." Reaching around himself and lightly placing his massive hand on Rodimus' shoulder, he coaxed him out from behind himself.

Flinching at the touch and wiggling out from under the massive palm, Rodimus stepped forward and looked at the shop front. At first he didn't really understand, at least not until he saw the *Paint Shop* sign flapping lightly in the wind.

For the first time since he had arrived, a huge smile carved its way across the hot rods face. His mouth gaped and he tried to make a noise Magnus could only assume was of delight, but instead came out as a low screech.

Despite his vocalizers frantic beep and squeaking, he turned to Magnus and tried to continue his failed speech. Mouth working quickly, he wheezed, coughed, and finally just stood there. His spoiler fluttered behind him, or at least the undamaged one did.

"I figured you might like this, but listen," Kneeling down on one knee in front of the little mech to get to his level a little better, "We can't do it today." That one line had sucked the delight right out of Rodimus' face and his spoiler dropped down with a loud *clang*.

Why take me here then? What the hell? What is this?

Magnus could see the growing frustration on his face and quickly continued before the hot rod became further agitated.

"Not because I don't have the money to do it, but because of this," Tugging at the bottom of the scarf, Rodimus knew he meant the collar, "It's in the way." He knew that, but it didn't stop him from whining and slouching. "When it is released, we are going to come right back here and you can pick whatever paint job you want. We will fit you for new more comfortable armor too." It was no secret that Rodimus' protoform had grown out of the armour he was currently in. As evident by the striped wires and creaky seams, he was due for an upgrade. Having been trapped in a slave trade for who knows how long with non mech handlers, they had no true idea how to really care for him. As a result, it left Rodimus to suffer, though that was all changing.

"So," Magnus said as he stood and brushed himself off, "would you like to explore the square?" Rodimus has crossed his arms and popped his hip out, still really ticked off, but despite the pouty look, he gave a feeble nod. "Come on then." Coaxing Rodimus by his side, together they walked into the crowd.

The first few booths were nothing but crafts, nothing Rodimus was interested in. On occasion he would stop and gawk at a few wind chimes, touching them and listening to the soft tone they made. Liking a few, he touched some more until the shopkeep started to eye him, a bit irritated so he moved on.

Staying close to Magnus' side, Rodimus was nearly shoulder to shoulder with him, well, shoulder to arm really. Every few steps their hands would graze and Rodimus would quickly shift over a bit. Seemingly going unnoticed, Rodimus couldn't help but glance up at the larger mech to see if he had felt it. A strange sensation of disappointment would flood his chest when Magnus just kept walking.

Moving away from the crafts and more towards food items, Rodimus tilted his nose into the air. Taking in a deep breath, his plating rippled as a sweet scent flooded his systems. His mouth watered and he turned on his heels, heading to his immediate right. Having seen the sudden detour, Magnus followed him, watching Rodimus nose lead him directly to a energon candy table.

Tabletop decorated with a vast selection of colorful candies, both Magnus and Rodimus came to a halt in front of it.

Candies large and small, round or narrow, all were placed neatly in open boxes for display. Behind the table, a mech was crafting a few in a pot, which happened to be the source of the lovely aroma.

Mouth hanging slightly open, Rodimus practically drooled over the sweets. Clenching and unclenching his fists by his sides, he turned towards Magnus, his optics pleading.

Please~

"I'll take one box." Sure he wouldn't eat regular energon, but sweets, of course. Typical young mech, regardless, Magnus was pleased at the sudden interest.

Hell yeah! Hell fricken yeah! Yeah!

Jumping lightly in place, Rodimus watched anxiously as credits were exchanged and the candies were handed over. Once in Magnus' possession, he popped the lid off and offered it to Rodimus.

Taking one, then two, then three candies, Rodimus stuffed two into his mouth and bit down. Mouth immediately flooded with high grade sweet energon, his shoulders and spoiler sagged and quivered in pleasure. It was... it was by far the best thing he had had in his mouth in a long time. Smooth and rich, it melted on his glossa like a dream. There was nothing bitter about it, nothing rotten or sour, just complete heaven.

"Easy, easy now, you'll make yourself sick," Catching Rodimus' hand mid way to his mouth with the third candy, he saw the sudden flash of fear in his optics. It faded a lot faster than before, but still it made his spark ache to see it. "Just, take it slow. There are plenty here." He reassured him, and released his hand, watching Rodimus drop it by his side. Rolling the energon candy between his fingers, he sighed and nodded. "Alright, come on. There should be a shop around here for more actual energon. I need to grab a few cubes before we head home."

Home.

Following slowly behind Magnus as the massive mech started moving through the crowd once more, Rodimus picked his hand back up and looked at his candy. Having already melted slightly in his palm, he just stared at it, squeezing it a bit. It cracked and a bit of energon flooded through the seam, trailing down his fingers.

Flinching suddenly, he halted his slow walking pace, hunching over slightly as that familiar twisting pain in his belly returned. It stung, tying his inner workings into knots, forcing him to close one optic and hack. The wave of pain hadn't been as bad as before, but none the less it had him staggering.

Struggling to get into an open space, Rodimus felt someone bump into him, grazing his side and part of his weld. The tolerable pain went to white searing agony, sending him reeling. Falling back and nearly onto his aft, he caught himself on a signpost, gripping it for dear life as he waited for the pain to succumb.

Stop.... NNgn stop.... please stop.

Gritting his denta, he had his free hand cupping his weld, protecting it from anybody else who might bump into it. Though that didn't stop him from dry heaving as another wave of pain washed over him.

Like all the times before, it took at least a few minutes for the pain to diminish into tolerable aches. Soon there was nothing left of the throb but a nauseating swelling sensation in his belly. Once he was able to stand himself upright and pant out the pain for a few minutes, he looked up for Magnus. When he didn't see the big blue mech looking at him with a worried expression, he felt his tank suddenly drop to his feet, because he wasn't there at all.

Spoiler jumping up, he looked to his right, then his left, and felt the sudden crushing pressure of panic on his chest as Magnus wasn't in sight. Despite the big blue oaf being tall and blue, there had been plenty of other mechs wandering the square who matched his height and build.

"Magnnszzzk!" Pushing through a clump of mechs, Rodimus tried to call out, vocalizer clicking. "MaaKkkKKkssZZz!" He coughed, covering his mouth the best he could while still using the other to try and protect the weld. "Szzzk!"

Spark pounding behind his damaged chestplate, he did his best to move through the crowd, only getting shoved around in turn. Coming to a halt in the middle of the square, chest heaving, he spotted an opening.

Rushing for it, he nearly ran, coming to an abrupt halt as something large and red stepped out in front of him.

Face connecting with the vibrant red armor, Rodimus felt himself falling back and his vision glitching.

Red.

His aft connected with the ground hard and he slid on his back, the world suddenly turning itself over onto him as his processor was sent reeling.

Red.

Despite propping himself up on his elbows and looking up at the mech he had crashed into,

his optics glitched again, obscuring the mechs face.

No. No. No. No.

As if the world around him had slowed to all but a halt, he felt the air sucked from his vents. Struggling to get to his feet, he felt heavy, limbs not moving the way he wanted them too as he claws at the ground. Backpedaling into the legs of onlookers, he twisted onto his hands and knees, shoving himself from the ground.

If he could scream he would have, but all he could manage was an open mouth and a flood of tears down his scuffed cheeks.

Please, not him! Please! NOT HIM!

He ran as fast as his legs would take him, shoving everybody and anybody to the side who got in his way.

He didn't look back, too afraid the Crimson mech would be charging after him, large hands waiting to crush him, pin him, destroy him. He wouldn't look back, he couldn't.

In front of him the crowd parted, seeing him coming and allowing him room to flee, but as he broke past, something snagged his wrist, yanking him backwards.

NO! NO! NO!"

He thrashed, feeling his other hand snagged and yanked in front of him, squeezed together to keep him from struggling too hard.

"Rodimus!"

NO! NO! NO!

"Rodimus! Look at me!" The voice was muffled, Rodimus sensors going haywire in his panic. "Rodimus!" The hands squeezing his wrists vanished and reappeared at his cheeks, cupping them gingerly. "Roddy!" Thrashing faltering, Rodimus settled, heaving in place. At some point he had closed his optics, keeping them squeezed shut and finding it difficult to reopen them. "Roddy, look at me."

Lower lip wobbling, tears flooded down hot cheeks, and he felt large thumbs rush them away.

"Magnnsszzk-" A soft hiccup and Rodimus finally opened his optics, seeing Ultra Magnus blurry face. Worry was plastered all over it, but at no point had he stopped brushing the flood of tears away. "Nnsszk" Frame sagging, he had never been so relieved, but the sudden flood of panic returned when he realized the Crimson mech might be following. "MNNSK! KKsshhzk!" He tried to turn, but Magnus kept his face firmly in place. Despite Rodimus reaching up and pulling at his wrists, he wouldn't allow him to turn around.

"Rodimus, relax. You're alright. Look at me-" He could see Rodimus' optics looking harshly to one side, desperate to turn around, "Look at me." Optics flicking back to Magnus' calm and cool ones, Rodimus swallowed hard.

Frame suddenly shivering, he winced, the terrible throb returning to his belly. Legs crumbling under himself, he gripped Magnus' arms harder for support. HIs intake clenched and he felt his tank turn, suddenly needing to purge.

"Rodimus!" Guiding Rodimus to the ground, Magnus cradled him close. "Rodimus, what's wrong, what happened?" He could see Rodimus upper half jerking, and immediately turned Rodimus to his side, letting him purge all over the side street.

Wrenching, Rodimus' purge consisted of what little energon he had in his system. Gasping for air each time he gagged, he coughed and leaned back against Magnus, trembling in his arms.

"I'm taking you home." Sliding his free arm under Rodimus' legs and lifting him with ease, Magnus pulled him close to his chest and turned. Being extra careful not to jostle or squish the damaged spoiler fin, he carried him with caution.

With haste he moved through the crowded, allowing Rodimus to steal a glance in the direction he had originally started to run from.

There, in the distance was the mech he had run into. Decorated red and white, the confused mech watched Magnus take him away. Having knelt down to help some of the mechs Rodimus had knocked over in his panicked escape, he had no visor.

Not him. It's not him.

Exhausted, Rodimus allowed himself to melt into Magnus' frame. Normally, he would have fought against such close contact, but as of right now he had never been happier for it. In his arms he was safe, at least for now.

Chapter 6

"I think he's sick," Magnus pinched the bridge of his nose as he paced back and forth through the hall, "or getting sick, or maybe he was sick this whole time." He wasn't unaware Rodimus had been unwell, but he didn't think it had been anything outside of a common virus brought on by poor living conditions. He had faith in himself to remedy whatever it was with good clean care, but so far it had seemed to do little good. Unfortunately, whatever was ailing the smaller mech had been a lot more serious than he had first thought. "He's been purging and... doubling over in pain. I'm not sure what it is, he won't let me close and I can't expect him to tell me," Sliding his hand down his face, Magnus only shook his head and continued speaking into his com, "I'm not sure what to do Wheeljack, he's been burning up ever since I brought him home. Normally his fever goes down after he gets some fuel in him but it doesn't seem to be putting a dent in it."

The walk home from the market had been a long one, with Rodimus purging every few minutes and eventually dry heaving when his tank had been depleted. He'd trembled so hard his armor rattled in Magnus' arms and no amount of caressing or holding could get him to settle, at least not until they arrived home. By then, Rodimus had broken into a cold sweat, his fever spiking to the point his body burned in Magnus' arms.

Having set him down on the sofa, Magnus got the little red mech as comfortable as possible before rushing to the next room to try and contact Wheeljack. At first he had begged him to send Ratchet, or FirstAid, anybody really who might be able to help him. He had even gone to the lengths of asking for Velocity who he had barely knew. All he did know was they she was a medic and might be of help, but like the rest, it was pointless. With only basic medical training, Magnus' hands were tied, and he could do nothing more than ease Rodimus mental suffering with soft coos and words of reassurance that he knew wouldn't get Rodimus far. It didn't help that Rodimus was all too self aware and the words of comfort bounced off his damaged frame with little effect if any at all.

"I'm sorry Mags, but it's just me around in this district for a while." Wheeljack's voice sounded over the com. "*But*," There was a sudden lilt in the scientist's voice, "I think I managed to crack the code on Rodimus' collar. Tricky little thing it is, but I'm certain I have it figured out." There was a small pause, as if Wheeljack had been waiting for Magnus to say something and when he didn't, he continued. "When you get the chance, bring the kid here and I'll get it off and give him a look-see myself." He was better at tinkering with weapons and gadgets, but in truth Wheeljack was as fine as any other medical mech around, plus he didn't really have any other option at this point.

"You *think*?" Magnus quipped, his eyebrows suddenly furrowing. "This isn't something I want done unless you're *sure* it will work. You could *kill* him. If we mess this up, he could die." He couldn't control his composure, and the urgency in his voice rose higher than he had wanted it to.

"Mags, listen, *I know* what I'm doing. I said I cracked it, I cracked it. When I pop the collar off I'll get a look at his vocalizer and just how bad the damage is. From there I can either fix it or have to order a new one based on his model. The worse thing that could happen is for me to have to order a new vocalizer and wait for it to be delivered to the shop. Even that should only take a few days. Mags, I know what I am doing, you trust me, don't you?" There was another small pause, "If you're *really* that concerned about it I could have Brainstorm and Perceptor come take a look, but it wouldn't be for another month, maybe more."

"No," Magnus' voice had softened now, and he glanced around the corner at Rodimus lying

on his side on the sofa. His face was pale, partially hidden against a pillow as he hugged it against himself. It seemed his full body trembling had subsided into gentle shivering that seemed to settle every few minutes. At least there was that, "he really needs to be looked at, and," Turning away from Rodimus and walking down the hall, Magnus continued, "I want that thing off him as soon as possible. I *do* trust you Wheeljack, I just don't... I don't want him to suffer anymore than he already has. Something just *isn't* right here. I can't figure it out on my own."

"I know, Mags. I know, but he's in good hands, I promise." Wheeljack's voice was calm and cool as always, if anything, confident. Perhaps that was why Magnus continued to seek his council on this sensitive matter.

"What time do you want me to meet you at the lab?" As far as Magnus had known, the lab was quite a ways away, at least on foot. With Rodimus unable to transform he would be carrying him again, though that wasn't really a problem when Rodimus weighed barely anything.

"I need to clean up the lab a bit and make room for the procedure, so any time midday would be perfect. Just ping me before you leave to let me know you're on your way."

"Alright, thank you Wheeljack." Cutting the call, Magnus took in a deep breath, held it, and offlined his optics. Releasing the breath after a moment, he turned towards the kitchen and moved forwards.

The first thing he had done once inside was get the medicine he had bought into a glass. Not exactly medical grade energon, the best he could find was some sort of powder mix. It was supposed to help bring down fevers, and despite being wary about its medicinal properties when bought in an alien marketplace, it would have to do. Magnus had nothing in his apartment except several different styles of aspirin, nothing really helpful.

Once the powder was in the glass, Magnus moved himself over to the fridge, snagging the handle before he heard a loud *crunch* below his foot. It crunched again when he shifted his weight.

"Hmm?" Lifting the tip of his massive foot, Magnus' optics rotated and zoomed in on something glistening on the floor. "Glass?" Kneeling down and picking up a few stray pieces, he examined them closely.

Confused, Magnus swept his hand gently under the fridge, pushing out the rest of the glass and gathering it into a little pile. He stared at it a little while longer before sweeping it into his massive palm and putting it into the trash.

As he walked by the door, he paused, stealing a quick glance at Rodimus who was still softly panting on the sofa. Every so often he would sigh, his breath coming out as a wet wheeze.

"Hmm..." Returning his attention to the task at hand, Magnus removed some sweet energon from the fridge and brought it over to the glass he was preparing. Filling the glass half way, he mixed it, and then poured a little more inside. Once satisfied the powder had been mixed, he stepped out into the living area. Snagging a chair as he moved into the room, he maneuvered his way to Rodimus and set it down by sofa.

"Rodimus," Magnus sat himself down in the chair, seeing Rodimus didn't shift right away at his call. "Roddy." Pausing when he saw Rodimus' optics slowly flicker online and glance up, Magnus tried to form a soft smile on his face. Like always, it seemed awkward and sort of forced, but Rodimus only let out a soft sigh at the sight of it. "How are you feeling?" He didn't expect an answer outside of a small gesture, and when none came, he frowned.

Frame covered in a light sheen of sweat, Rodimus panted softly into the pillow he was currently hugging. Despite the tremors, purging, and dry heaving having subsided, Rodimus' face remained pale. Large bags had formed under his optics that appeared sunken into his head, and his lips were so dry that had started to crack. On occasion he would lick them, but it did little good with his constant panting.

Squinting as something massive suddenly placed itself over his forehead, Rodimus tried to look up at Magnus' hand. At no point had he tried to pull away, instead he just watched Magnus stare off to the side and think about whatever it was he was thinking about with his hand there.

"Seems your fever has settled a bit, but you're still burning up." Removing his hand and instead of retracting it to his own body, Magnus took ahold of Rodimus' arm. Very slowly, and with care, he lifted it up and brought it close to his face.

What the hell are you doing?

Raising a tired brow, Rodimus watched on as Magnus rotated his arm and squinted at the joints. It was weird, and he didn't understand, but again, he didn't pull away. Magnus grip was soft; his fingers anything but forceful, in fact, Rodimus would have pulled free whenever he wanted. Instead, he allowed Magnus to continue, curious as to what he was up to as he picked at a bit of his peeling paint.

"Hmm." Running a massive thumb through Rodimus' little palm, Magnus spread his dirty servos apart, inspecting each and every one of them. Once in awhile he would pause, *really* looking at one and rubbing the tip of his thumb over a scuff before moving on.

Earlier while in the kitchen, he had thought it strange there would be a broken glass on the floor since he hadn't remembered dropping one. Then he had remembered he had caught Rodimus in there *alone*. What if he had broken the glass to try and hurt himself? He hadn't even considered that at the time, but with him being so defiant when it came to eating, it was a possibility that Rodimus might try and harm himself.

Except, Rodimus' hand were clean, or at least as clean as they could be. His joints were still bent out of place and his wires still exposed and in some places stripped, but there was nothing *new*.

Squeezing Rodimus' hand in his own, Magnus hesitated for a moment before pulling their hands towards his mouth. Dimming his optics, he pressed his lips against his own hand, still clutching Rodimus' little hand in his own.

Optics brightening, Rodimus watched on as Magnus' optics seemed to gloss over and vanish into a daze. He seemed worried, his usual stone like expression now soft, vulnerable even as he bared a part of himself to Rodimus that he had never seen.

Spark fumbling behind a scuffed chestplate, Rodimus felt something catch in his intake. The feeling surged through his frame and he panicked, yanking his hand back suddenly. He bore an expression to Magnus that was uncertain, and confused.

"I-" Magnus began, suddenly remembering he had the medicine in his other hand, "made this for you. It's some sweet energon with some medicine mixed in. It *should* help you feel better, at least your tank, I'm not sure it will do much for the fever." At least not until he can get medical supplies solely for cybertronian body types.

Staring at the glass, Rodimus turned his head further into his pillow, hiding his lips.

"Rodimus, please, you really need to eat something. Your tank is empty from purging, you *really* should just have a few sips, just something in your tank." Maybe he had been afraid of purging it up and making a mess, or maybe Rodimus was reverting back to being difficult, all Magnus knew was his persisting wasn't going to work. He was extra sure of that when Rodimus offlined his optics, completely ignoring him. "Well, it's right here if you want some." Setting the glass on the coffee table, Magnus sat back in his chair and just sighed.

He sat for hours by Rodimus' side, watching his chest rise and fall slowly and his spoiler twitch as he reached. On occasion Rodimus would whimper and kick a leg out, but settle quickly. When he didn't settle right away, Magnus would reach out and rub his chevron. Only once in awhile would he stroke Rodimus' head, afraid he might wake up if he jostled him too much. Regardless, it had started to get late and Magnus was equally exhausted from the day's events.

It had taken a bit of finessing, but Magnus had managed to scoop Rodimus up into his arms once more and carry him to his room. Making sure to step with caution as to not shake the mech awake, Magnus half turned to fit through the doors threshold. Progressing to the bed, he set Rodimus down on it and tucked him in loosely.

Leaving the room as quietly as he had entering it, Magnus slowly made his way down the hall towards his own room.

Tomorrow would be better. Tomorrow was the day Rodimus would finally be free. At least physically, mentally, Magnus feared there was a lot of work that still needed to be done, but Rodimus had been worth it. There had been something about him that he couldn't quite understand. He didn't really *know* anything about him, and yet, just looking at him sent his spark reeling. If anything, he couldn't wait to hear him speak and figure him out, but all that was in time. He wasn't going to rush Rodimus, he would be as patient as Rodimus needed him to be.

"Am I hurting you?" The spike nosing into Rodimus' aft port seemed to recede a bit, as if to wait for an answer. It hadn't mattered. He couldn't give one, at least one that wasn't anything more than a wheezed pant. "Does that hurt?" The Crimson mech nudged against him a little harder, his spike head breaching past the tight calibers that made up Rodimus' aft port.

Flat on his back, face soaked with tears, Rodimus clawed at the arm holding his neck down. It had been useless to struggle and he knew that, but his body still tried. He had bucked at first, tried to scream, tried to get off the berth but the Crimson mech was faster, and so much stronger.

In his drug induced haze, his body burned against his will, but it did little to ease the harsh pinch and pull of his aft being breached. With no foreplay and nothing but the usual rubbing and foul talk, the Crimson mech did what he did best and pushed forward. In truth it had been unusual he was moving so carefully as if he was for the first time afraid to break him. He had always been so eager to cause him pain, and yet this session, he was... softer. His usual deep rumbling tone was a whisper, but his face was far too close to Rodimus' own for comfort. He could feel the massive mech's breath on his face, the stench of high grade energon in his breath. It was sour, much like the massive mechs demeanor as he continued to butt his face against his.

More than once he nudged his masked faceplate against Rodimus' cheek, cuddling him and placing what he could only imagine were versions of his kisses on his face. Did he even have lip plates? He didn't really care. He didn't want them on him anyway, didn't want anything about this

mech on him. His hands, his body, his will, nothing.

"Ahsskz!~" Legs jerking as the massive spike's head pushed deeper, he kicked out his right leg, trying to roll but failing as the Crimson mech's weight kept him pinned in place. "SSkkzk!!" He kicked again, feeling his aft throb painfully in response to the unwanted thing probing him.

"Stop it," The mech thrust a little deeper, chuckling as he felt Rodimus' aft ring strain against his massive spike. It rippled, struggling to accommodate the mass, and he could feel it struggling, "Look at me." Dragging his hips back and allowing Rodimus' aft ring to relax a bit, he let himself glide right back in. "Stop squirming."

His spike pulsed when he watched Rodimus open his mouth, and fresh tears streamed down the sides of his cheeks, soaking the sheets below. That twisted pained expression making him purr. His spike swelled inside of the already tight space, expanding and snagging already irritated mesh walls. Pulling on them back and forth, it only increased the pained expression on the flame colored mechs face.

"Look at me." Hips inching even further up, he growled when Rodimus snapped his optics shut and turned his head to the side, angling his face away from him. "Look at me!" Jerking his hips harshly against the little mech, Rodimus' hips lifted off the berth momentarily. His abdominal plating bulged out slightly as the massive spike took up a sudden amount of space, leaving Rodimus to arch and claw even harder against the mech.

Optics snapping open, he tossed his head back, mouth open to release a loud shriek littered with static. It popped in and out, his vocalizer sparking every few seconds before finally it glitched and cut the sound off completely. His silent wail still strained his neck cables, causing a few of the mesh surrounding the cables to tear at how hard he was straining.

"Look at me you rust spot! LOOK AT ME!" Snagging Rodimus' cheeks into his hands before Rodimus could even bring his face back down, the mech forced them face to face. "You're nothing! Nothing! You're only good for a place to dump my fluid, and you'll never be anything more! You're mine, do you hear me? MINE, and nobody else will ever have you. Nobody will save you, I'll always find you. I'll always find you and put you back in your place, do you hear me?" Hips moving at a brutal pace, Rodimus' optics rolled into the back of his head. His fingers sank into the Crimson mech's wrists seams and he tugged, though it was useless.

Aft port spurting a mix of energon and transfluid, the delicate mesh tore, much like the rest of him. Torn, hurt, destroyed by unwanted touch, and he couldn't do anything about it. He was stuck here, this was his purpose now. This was it. No escape.

"You're nothing! You're nothing!" Once gentle thrusts now turned unkind, mean, and violent. The pain was excruciating, at least for awhile, and then it was just a dull ache. The rabid shouting faded, and for a moment Rodimus wondered if the Crimson mech was covering his audio receptors, but no. His vision was fading, and he felt his head spin. Back when he had first arrived as a stock member, he would have fought this feeling, not wanting to show weakness, but now, he let it wash over him.

Take me.

He didn't feel the mech release his face and turn his hand's attention to his limp spike, no doubt squeezing it hard enough to crush the plating. He didn't care, darkness was here.

Lurching upright in bed, Rodimus heaved in a heavy breath of air, sucking it down his intake as if he had been without it for hours. Along with the sudden jerk to consciousness, he had tossed his arms up defensively, only lowering them when no hands grabbed him to pin him.

Realizing it had only been a nightmare; Rodimus swallowed hard and allowed his arms to sag down to his front. One hand had stayed behind, pressing into his face and rubbing up and down as he tried to collect himself. His sensory net was on fire; in fact... his whole body felt like it was burning up.

Dropping his hand from his face, his optics suddenly fixated themselves on something floating upwards into the air.

His armor was *steaming* and yet his systems were not reading he was overheating, and even then would he *steam*? It rose up from his joints, vanishing into the open air of the spare room, leaving him to listen to his body sizzling. It had been strange, as he didn't feel warm, let alone *hot* enough to steam. Sure, there had been plenty of times he had gotten worked up, but it never resulted in this, maybe fluffed up plating, but not *steam*.

What the... hell...

Baffled, he raised his hand to his chest, which was also wafting out thick puffs of steam. Allowing his fingers to hover over the armor, he could feel a boiling heat radiating up off of himself. So much hotter than just a regular fever, something was... *off*.

Swallowing hard, he pressed his fingers against his chestplate and immediately felt the tips burn against the scalding hot metal. They sizzled and sweat bubbled around his fingers a moment before he pulled away.

What the hell is happening to me?

The steam started to fade, and in a matter of minutes his frame had cooled down to what he assumed was his normal temperature. It had been strange; the extra heat didn't seem to affect him like the fever. Was it different? Or was it a symptom? What if he was broken?

He wasn't sure, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. What he *did* know was that he wasn't going to sit around and wait for himself to start steaming again, and with the nightmare still fresh on his mind he wasn't too keen on heading right back to sleep either. Instead he kicked the blankets back and stood on unstable legs, holding onto the bedside for a second to steady himself before leaving the room.

Ruffling his plating did little to shake the achy feeling from his joints, nor the ghostlike feeling of massive hands still squeezing at his body. He was sticky from sweating and all around uncomfortable. No matter how many times he shook his head, thick and unkind fingers continued to pull at his body. Raking down his chest and thighs, he felt woozy, trying to pick up the pace to his destination.

Stepping into the bathroom and flicking the light on, Rodimus squinted as his optics tried to adjust to the harsh light. A few blinks and he could see the pristine porcelain of the sink and glass door of the shower.

Sliding the glass door back and reaching inside, he turned the knob and listens to the pipes behind the wall groan. In a matter of seconds water spurt from the shower head and he held his

hand under it, just staring at it as it collected in his palm and rolled down his wrist. It was cold, and he made no move to turn the water higher. Instead he stepped inside, tilting his face under the spray and shuttering his optics. His sagged, the damaged quivering as the cold water glossed over the crease in the plating. It stung, but he ignored it and just stood there for what felt like a century.

He hadn't noticed right away that his hands had been moving up and down his frame, his fingertips grazing over every dent and scuff they could find. They all hurt, some more than others, and he lingered on the ones that hurt the most, pressing into them. When his hands moved further down, he rubbed around his own panel, tracing the damaged seam towards his inner thigh. Bringing his hands back up, he rubbed his panel again, lingering on a few scuffs before moving towards his belly.

Rotating, Rodimus fluttered his spoiler and glanced up towards the door. His optics glitched, and he closed them, grimacing as he heard the disgusting grunts and hoots of everybody who had ever got themselves off to him while he tried to bathe. Always watching, always there to make sure every little bit of dignity he thought he could get away with was gone.

Peeping his optics back open, he had expected to see Magnus there, doing what all the others had, but again, he wasn't. There had been nothing beyond the doors threshold but darkness. No prying eyes, no rude remarks, nothing. Peace, and yet, he felt so uneasy.

Tank twisting, he hissed staggering in the shower and gripping the wall for support. It was dull, nothing like the aches he had experienced before, but still uncomfortable.

Looking down, Rodimus pressed his fingertips into his weld, wincing again as another sharp pain shot through his spinal strut, leaving him cry out. Unfortunately, his mouth had only opened, but no sound broke free. Like always, he was trapped in his own body.

Gritting his denta and slamming his first against the wall, he just shook his head back and forth. Bringing his first back, he hit the wall again and again and again until the joints that made up his knuckles broke free, hitting the floor with a soft *tink*.

He hadn't stopped until a smear of energon was left in its place and his hand hurt more than his belly. The pain radiating up from his knuckles into his forearm to make his elbow hurt, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered at this point, not his body, not his mind, nothing.

Rinsing off his hand and the wall, he turned the shower off and stepped outside. Like always there was a pile of perfectly folded towels in a basket by the shower door. Snagging one he dried himself off and tossed it towards the hamper, not caring that he missed.

Flicking off the light, Rodimus trudged down the hall back towards his room. The weight of recharge was calling to him once more and this time he hoped he could sleep in peace. Too bad the ebbing panic was still at the back of his mind, and restful nights just were not possible.

Stalking past Magnus' bedroom door, Rodimus topped right after it, standing in place and tilting his head towards the wall. Dimming his optics, he listened for Magnus soft snoring. For the first time, he couldn't hear it.

Spoiler fluttering nervously, he took a step back and peered through the crack opening. From what he could see, Magnus was asleep on his side, like always. His frame rose and fell with his breathing, but he made no noise.

Bumping the door with his hands, it swung open with a soft whine. Having frozen after doing so, Rodimus looked from the door, up to Magnus. To his surprise, he hadn't woken him. Good.

Timidly, Rodimus stepped in, freezing every time he heard Magnus make a soft noise, and then continuing until he got to the bedside. From there he just stood and stared at Magnus, his optics scanning over everything they possibly could.

Magnus usually always slept on his side, and his bed seemed big enough that it could accommodate *two* mechs even when he laid flat. It looked so soft, and the pillows seemed so fluffy, and only then did Rodimus realize his snoring had been muffled into the pillows.

Not having realized he was picking at his knuckles until they stung, Rodimus reached out and touched the comforter. It was still as soft as he had remembered it, from the first time he had awoken in Magnus bed. It was ten times more comfortable than the guest bed, and a million times better than the floor.

"Mhm~" Magnus shifted, his massive hand suddenly sliding out from under the covers to bump against Rodimus' hand.

Intake suddenly tightening at the sight of the large digits, Rodimus snagged his hand back. His spark started to pound as he felt his joints tighten and an invisible hand tighten around his throat. It was just as massive as Magnus, and he wheezed, turning away, trying to rid himself of the feeling. It only persisted, the feeling of heavy servos pulling on him, hurting him, and he felt his lower lip quiver.

It's only Magnus.

He chanted in his mind louder and louder, forcing his frame to settle. He was okay; Magnus wasn't like the Crimson mech. Magnus was... kind and gentle. Magnus would never hurt him. He wouldn't ever do things like that to him, he promised. He's going to get the collar off, and he won't have to be afraid of the Masters anymore.

It's okay.

Spark settling and trembling fists relaxing into open palms, Rodimus sagged in place.

I'm so tired.

Looking up at the door and then back to Magnus who was still sleeping soundly, Rodimus took in a deep breath, and then slowly exhaled.

He had roused himself from his slumber far before his alarm could do the honors. Instead, Magnus brought his optics halfway online, letting them adjust to the low light of the room and focus on the clock on his nightstand.

It was eight, a good time to get up and make himself a hot cup of energon and put on the early morning news. Perhaps he would check on Rodimus to make sure he was still sleeping. If not, he could try and make him some breakfast. It would be a good time to deliver the news that today he was going to be free. Hopefully that would put him in good spirits, and with Wheeljack's help figure out what was making him so ill.

Taking a deep breath and giving his massive pillow a quick cuddle, Magnus pushed himself up and stretched. The armor around his shoulders groaned and cracked, and he tried to rub the

sleep from his optics. With a massive yawn, he pushed himself from his bed, only for his feet to hit something slightly lumpier than the floor.

"Huh?!" Struggling not to step on the foreign object below his bed, he stumbled forwards, throwing out his hands to try and catch himself on the wall. It had been too bad that his frame was massive and heavy and the wall did little to brace him. Instead, Magnus' right hand went clear through the plaster and into the kitchen, sinking himself to his elbow and knocking several of the pictures that had been mounted on the wall to the floor.

Looking down in the commotion, Magnus spotted the familiar dull red and gold paint that made up Rodimus' frame. He had been lying on his side by the bed, but was now sitting up rubbing at his side where Magnus must have stepped on him.

"Rodimus?" Yanking his arm back through the wall with ease, Magnus dropped to Rodimus' side immediately. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to step on you. Did I hurt you? Are you alright? What are you doing sleeping on the floor?" All the questions flooded from his mouth faster than Rodimus could process them and it only became apparent to Magnus when Rodimus gave him a perturbed look. He didn't answer any of the questions and instead just kept rubbing his side. "I'm sorry," Magnus said slowly this time, "Did I hurt you?" This time Rodimus shook his head, he was okay, just startled. "Good." Without thinking, Magnus reached up and cupped Rodimus' cheeks, squishing them together until Rodimus made a kissy face. "Are you feeling better?" He rubbed his thumbs under Rodimus' optics, noticing he was still slightly sweaty.

Blinking, Rodimus just stared, not really sure what to do with his face the way it was. When he had finally decided pulling away was good, Magnus' hands moved. One placed itself against his forehead and remained there for only a second, and then dropped down by his sides.

"You're still warm, but you look a little better today. Do you feel better?" Cheeks still a light tint of pink, Rodimus' optics were slightly glossy. Had he drank some of the medicine? He certainly looked a bit cleaner. "What's this from?" Damaged knuckles had caught the larger mech's attention, and he tugged Rodimus' little hand up towards his face. "What happened?" He ran his thumb over the missing joints, and immediately Rodimus snapped his hand away from him. He lowered his optics, struggling to keep away from Magnus' pressing gaze, and instead let them wander to the hole in the wall.

"Don't worry about that," Magnus stood and looked at his dusty arm, "Nothing a patch can't fix." It was an accident, so no reason to get upset about it. "I'm going to shower this off and then I have something important I want to tell you." He extended his hand, offering to help Rodimus up, but the smaller mech once again averted his gaze from him. He kept his head low, as if to submit to Magnus, and the larger mech pulled his hand back. "I'll only be a few minutes if you want to wait for me to make breakfast. If you're hungry now you can eat, the energon is in the fridge and there is a glass by the sink. Okay?" There was no answer, but Rodimus' spoiler did perk up slightly to let him know he was listening. Good enough.

Heading out of the room, Magnus made his way out into the hall and towards the washroom. It had been a few seconds before Rodimus could hear the spray of the water and Magnus slide the glass door closed.

He hadn't realized he was picking at his fingers, at least not until he poked a particularly sensitive joint and it jolted him back to reality.

What does he want to talk about?

Was he upset about what had happened in the marketplace the day before? Would he scold

him for getting lost? Was he becoming more trouble than he was worth? What if he was going to bring him back? What if he was just going to up and leave him? Then what?

No, no...

He shook his head, struggling to dispel the thoughts. Magnus wasn't like that. He wouldn't do that. He said he would get him a new paint job, and life would be better, right? But what if he was just fooling him, what if he was just letting his guard down and he *was* like all the others and this was just some... cruel new Crimson mech who fed off his mental suffering.

Stop, he's not like that, he's not.

Curling into himself and rocking, Rodimus whimpered, his armor rippling as he felt unsettled. The thought of going back haunted him.

The pain in his belly zapped him, and he uncurled himself, resting his back against the bed. It was a sharp burning pain that shot up his spinal strut and then pulsed through his groin every few seconds. It cramped, and he felt his valve flutter behind its panel, aching with each throb. It was a feeling that was less than desirable, and when he shifted positions he did little to help.

"ZSsk-" Looking down at the weld along his abdominal plating, it seemed a different color. The usual red armor was slightly gray and a more sickening color the closer it got to the weld. Touching it only irritated it and sent his sensory net reeling, screaming at him to leave it alone, and he did. "NNgssk-"

He waited for the throbbing to subside before standing, staring at the hole in the wall. He was surprised Magnus wasn't too upset about it and wondered if he had done something like that before.

The sound of the shower suddenly stopped, and Rodimus half turned, listening closely as he heard the heavy *thump thump* of Magnus' feet exiting the shower. There was a brief silence, and Rodimus had attributed it to the fact Magnus was drying himself off, and then the continued thumping of his feet as he left the bathroom.

"Roddy?" He heard his name being called from outside the room, and hesitantly he walked to the door. Peeking around the corner he paused when he saw Magnus ruffling a towel over his head.

Swallowing hard, Rodimus felt his spark flutter suddenly and he tried to clear his intake as a knot formed. His cheeks burned abruptly, and he hid his face into the doorframe, feeling foolish for doing so. It didn't matter, as Magnus walked by he felt better about hiding his face.

"Roddy, come here, come get something to eat. I have something to tell you." Oh he knew, and he was worried about what it was.

Begrudgingly, the hot rod stepped out of the threshold and trudged to the kitchen, Magnus ahead of him. As he rounded the corner he could see Magnus already preparing two glasses of energon.

"Here you go." He slid the glass across the center island and watched Rodimus reach out to it with shaking hands. "Roddy," Taking a quick sip of his own energon and licking his lips, Magnus watched the tense mech just hold his glass, "are you alright?" They looked optics for a moment, and Rodimus just nodded, bringing his glass up to his lips but struggling to steady it. He took a sip, or at least it looked like he did. "Well, how do you feel about getting that collar off today?"

Expression bare, Rodimus looked like he was struggling to process what Magnus had said.

Did he actually say what he said? Had he imagined it? Was this some sort of ever dream? They could get it off... today?

"Noon time, you and I will be headed to Wheeljack's shop and we're going to get that thing off of you. Wheeljack might also be able to get your vocalizer up and running too. You will be able to speak when that thing is gone. You won't ever have to see it again, and I will personally make sure one is never placed on you ever again-" Magnus trailed off as the glass slipped from Rodimus' hand and shattered on the floor.

Optics as round as dinner plates, his spoiler suddenly flapped upwards, higher than Magnus had ever seen it go, and then there was... a huge smile. Frantic beeping and clicks escaped Rodimus' vocalizer as he tried to make some sort of noise. He jumped only once, hunched over when his belly ached but quickly recovered and wiggled in place.

It hurt to try and speak, but he just couldn't help himself. Finally this heavy thing would be off. Finally he could be free of the Masters and that Crimson mech and he could... he could live.

Coolant welled in his optics and he turned away from Magnus, his spoiler sagging back down. Bringing the back of his hand up to his optics, he struggled to brush away the flood of coolant.

Finally.

Magnus had waited for him outside on the curb, understanding Rodimus' hesitant nature to the outside world after the most recent event. The wait hadn't been too long, at max ten minutes as Rodimus paced inside of the complexes lobby, just staring at Magnus through the massive glass windows. He didn't want to leave the safety of the building, but if he didn't then the collar would never come off, and he wanted that a lot more.

Once managing to get himself outside, Rodimus rushed to the larger mech's side, practically slamming into him. It must have looked silly when he grabbed at Magnus's arm, like a child afraid to leave its parent, but when he realized what he was doing he stepped back and ruffled his armor. He was scared, but he tilted his nose into the air and fluffed out his chest, wanting to seem calm and cool.

"Ready?" Placing a gentle hand on Rodimus' shoulder, Magnus lightly pulled him in the opposite direction that had gone in the day before. "It's a bit of a walk, so if you get tired just tell me, I don't mind carrying you."

I don't need to be carried, I can walk just fine.

Snorting, Rodimus strut himself a few steps ahead of Magnus, not lasting long in the lead as each person who passed by unsettled him. It only took one person to brush against him for him to panic. The last thing he wanted was to be snagged off the street and brought to a different Stock house to be sold out to the highest bidder.

How did I even end up there in the first place...

It had all been a blur when he had first been captured. Was he even captured? He didn't know. The earliest memories he had were being processed through the Stock house and the Masters

putting him in his place. As far as he knew, he was *built* to be there. Maybe the Crimson mech was right, he was nothing, and being a data dump was his only purpose.

"Roddy-" Magnus voice was muffled, "Roddy." Louder this time, Rodimus looked up to see Magnus concerned face looking down at him. "Are you alright? You stopped walking; do you need me to carry you?"

No.

Rodimus shook his head and took his place by Magnus side this time, no longer wanting to pace ahead. Keeping tucked close to Magnus' arm, they walked the last few blocks to the lab.

The lab had been squished between two other buildings that left all three roofs uneven. It hadn't been anything pretty to look at in the slightest and in truth Rodimus had been a little disappointed when Magnus pointed it out. He had expected something grander, more pristine, but then again he wasn't exactly sure what he had been expecting. Having had lived the majority of his life through random hotel rooms and pitch black rooms in the Stock house, the lab was a palace.

"Come on, Wheeljack is waiting for us." Holding the main door open for Rodimus, the little red mech hesitantly walked inside. Despite pausing just past the door, Rodimus had been nudged inside when Magnus stepped behind him, and the two were in the bare lobby.

Everything was white, or at least some sort of soft metallic color. It certainly looked a lot better on the inside than it had on the outside and Rodimus had wondered if it was just a disguise.

"Ah! Welcome, right on time as always." Clapping as he walked around the corner, Wheeljack stood in the center of the main lobby. Putting his hands on his hips, he chuckles as Rodimus dipped behind Magnus. "Come on, this way," Coaxing the two of them to follow, Wheeljack moved towards the left hall, "It shouldn't take me more than a minute to get it off."

Reaching around and pulling Rodimus in front of himself, Magnus pushed him forward and together they followed Wheeljack.

"Just sit in here and I'll be right back." Pointing to a room and walking past it, Wheeljack vanished into another room a few doors down. "Just gonna to grab the scanner."

Turning into the room Wheeljack had instructed them to enter, Rodimus put the brakes on instantly. Digging his pronged toes into the floor, his frame jerked hard and Magnus walked into him.

"Roddy?" He felt Rodimus suddenly jerk back against him, and then his arms and legs flailed out, grabbing the doorframe, refusing to enter.

In the center of the room was a single white medical berth and a tray of tools by its side. Lit with a single hovering light, it sent panic through Rodimus entire systems. The world around him seemed to shift out from under his feet, and he felt faint.

NO!

He tried to backpedal, shoving himself against Magnus even harder, managing to get the

massive mech to take a step back. His shoving was panicked, only getting more violent the harder Magnus tried to push him into the room.

NO NO NO! I WON'T!

"Rodimus, calm down!" Limbs started to flail, and Rodimus turned against him, shoving him with open hands. It did little good, as Magnus was heavy, and when he snagged Rodimus' hands, it only seemed to make it worse.

Yanking hard against the massive mechs hands, Rodimus opened his mouth to scream, but only a loud static filled beep was emitted. He kicked and thrashed, his spoiler flapping frantically against his back.

"Rodimus! What's the matter with you?!"

How could you! How could you! Let go of me! Let go of me you scrap pile!

Lifting Rodimus off the ground with ease, Magnus moved towards the berth, the thrashing only increasing. Some of Rodimus screams managed to break through, and they were blood curdling, making Magnus panic.

"Rodimus! What's the matter!? Why are you doing this?"

You're just like all the rest! Let go of me! get off of me! I knew it! I knew it!

Tears flooded Rodimus' cheeks and he flashed fangs at Magnus, sinking them into the massive mechs hand. Despite biting as hard as he could, Magnus didn't release him, instead he kept him pinned to the table.

"Stop it! Rodimus! Look at me!" He tried not to shout, as it was only making it worse. He had seen Rodimus panic, but it wasn't like this. This was pure desperation, pure fear. "Rodimus, *please* just look at me." Banging his legs against the end of the table, Rodimus continued to struggle, releasing Magnus hand and trying to scream again. The hulking mechs grip was too tight, he couldn't break free.

It hadn't taken long for him to tire, and he laid there under massive hands that pinned him hyperventilating. His shaking hands dug into Magnus' arms, hooked into seams, but not pulling.

"Rodimus," Magnus practically whispered, "look at me. Look-" Blue optics locked with his, and they rotated, so afraid they were practically burning white. "Whatever you *think* is going to happen to you... it's not. Roddy look at me," The hot rods optics flicked around the room suddenly, as if others would come and pin him, "Roddy, just breathe." Inhaling and exhaling large breaths, he tried to get Rodimus to match his venting, and after a moment, he did. "You're fine." his grip loosened when he felt Rodimus relax, but his frame was rattling. "Come here," Carefully scooping Rodimus into his arms, he hugged him close. Chest to chest, he pressed the smaller mech against him in an attempt to sooth him. "You're fine."

I don't understand.

Hiccupping into Magnus' neck, Rodimus sobbed. What the hell was going on, what was this? Did he just tell him he was going to put the collar on him as a ruse to install a new seal inside of him, or was he telling the truth. What the *hell* was happening?

"You're alright." Running his hand gently up and down Rodimus' spinal strut to sooth him, Magnus rocked back and forth on each foot. Ignoring the fact Rodimus was covering his shoulder

in snot and coolant, he just kept rocking.

"Is everything alright in here?" Wheeljack stepped in, data pad in hand.

"Panic attack." Magnus mumbled, rubbing the tip of Rodimus undamaged spoiler.
"Something about the berth."

"Mhm, well then, I suppose we should start with the exam then and get that out of the way." Stepping closer, Wheeljack pushed a few buttons on his data pad and pointed to the berth. "If you *can* get him on it for at least the full body scan, then I can get the collar off with him standing." It was obvious it would only traumatize the hot rod more to pin him, so Magnus stepped up to the berth and sat on it himself. Keeping Rodimus in his lap, he gently rotated him in his lap so Rodimus' back was against his chest.

"Nnsk!" Jerking forward to try and slide from Magnus' lap, Magnus' massive hand splayed over his chest, pulling him back against him. His grip wasn't as forceful this time, and instead, soft. He tapped Rodimus' chest, and slid his other hand around Rodimus' waist, keeping him secure in place. "Zsk!" His spoiler flapped, not liking this one bit, but Magnus cooed to him above him.

"You're alright, just hold still for the scan. It won't be long and then we can stand?" He could feel Rodimus starting to pant, his panic building back up. "Wheeljack."

"I'm going, I'm going." Standing in front of the two of them, Wheeljack held the data pad out and a beam of light shone out.

Jumping, Rodimus bucked, but again Magnus held him firmly in place, doing his best to sooth him with soft words and gentle nuzzles.

"Almost there," Wheeljack's beam moved down Rodimus' waist, and he lingered there, suddenly humming to himself, "Interesting." He scanned up and down his abdomen a few more times before finally moving down to his legs and feet. Completing the scan, he rubbed his chin. "Very interesting."

"What?" Magnus asked as Wheeljack stepped closer and suddenly poked at Rodimus' weld.

"AHssk!~" Arching against Magnus, Rodimus twisted, trying his best to get the weld away from Wheeljack who only kept prodding it. It hurt, and the more he jabbed, the worse it became. "Stosssk-zzk!" His vocalizer beeped when he tried to cry out.

"Stop! You're hurting him!" Magnus snapped and Wheeljack backed off.

"It's a seal."

"A what?" Magnus struggled to get Rodimus to settle again. The little mech squirmed in his grip, whimpering and kicking to get free. "Roddy-" He cooed, turning Rodimus in his arms once more for them to be chest to chest.

"A false seal. It's some weird kinky shit I have seen cybertronians do. It's like... a... uh... it's like an interfacing mod. You know how sometimes mechs want bigger and better spikes? Well it's like that except it's a valve mod." Scrolling through the results of the data pad, Wheeljack nodded.

"You mean they put a seal inside of him? To what? Tear through it to get off on it?"

"Precisely." Wheeljack chimed, perhaps a little too happy about the discovery. "Though judging by the size of the weld and the discoloration of the armor and protoform, I would say this

is probably... well... he's definitely had over a dozen installed... maybe more.

"Primus-" Tank twisting at the thought of Rodimus being subject to constant seal tearing had his spark aching.

"The weld is from them constantly installing it inside of him. See there is no easy way to put it in. It has to be connected to his sensory net so it can't just be inserted via the valve. *Surgery* is required. It's not a common mod because of that... but if he was rented out as a pleasure mech to different clients... it makes sense they would want things like this."

It was... putrid, to subject him to such things. A seal tear was supposed to be... supposed to be something between a mech and another who loved each other. It wasn't just a casual thing. It was sacred, but it was still something that shouldn't have been messed around with. It was just torture.

"You say he's been sick lately? Well it's because of the seal. I'm sure you already know this but for the sake of it, I'll explain it anyway. You see, if a mech doesn't tear his factory seal by a certain point in their life, it will naturally disintegrate. False seals do not, as they are meant to be temporary and torn within a week of it being installed. If not, it irritates the valve mesh around it, as it's unnatural. That is what's happening along with a system infection. I really doubt whoever was installing these seals really cared about cleanly workspace. Bacteria are growing inside of the wound and around the seal, causing it to well. It's full of pus and infected energon, and will only get worse if not repaired.

"So what do we do?"

"I can remove it through surgery-" Wheeljack paused as Rodimus suddenly jerked in Magnus' arms, not liking that idea. His spoiler flapped in protest, and he whined when Magnus squished him against his chest to settle him. "Or you can tear it yourself."

"Tear it... you mean-"

"Yes, by going up there and getting it yourself, but I wouldn't expect it to be a very good time. There is massive fluid buildup in his abdomen and when and if you pop that seal, it's all going to come out. It's going to be quite the mess, but his body will start to heal itself after that. As of right now his systems are attacking themselves, and I don't expect him to last longer than a few months. It will develop into a rust infection and from there it's over." Crossing his arms, Wheeljack shrugged. "What do you want to do?"

Magnus was silent only looking down at Rodimus who was pressing his face into his chestplate. He didn't look up, but Magnus could see coolant streaming down his cheeks in massive globs. He just shook his head, silently begging Magnus to not go through with this.

"I think... he's been tortured enough today." Forcing Rodimus down would only make things worse. Losing his trust at this point wasn't worth it, he would figure it out, or at least take a few days to try and get Rodimus to reconsider. If he could calm him enough to agree to the surgery it would be better than cornering him. "I need a day to think." He was happy Wheeljack didn't disapprove of his choice, but instead left the room for a moment to allow Rodimus to breathe.

"Roddy," Pulling Rodimus away from his chest, he cradled the hot rod briefly, "I'm sorry." Rubbing a massive white thumb across Rodimus soaking wet cheek, Magnus sighed. "I'm sorry I couldn't find you sooner. I'm sorry things turned out the way they did, but I promise, it's going to get better. Right here, right now." He kept brushing away tears, keeping Rodimus close until his ragged breathing settled. "I'm *never* going to hurt you, alright? I'm never going to. We're going to figure this out and things will be better." Huge shoulders sagged, and Magnus took a deep breath.

"How about we get this thing off now, hmm?" He touched the side of the collar, and Rodimus nodded. "Wheeljack-" He didn't have to shout, as Wheeljack was waiting outside of the door, propped up against the wall.

"Alright, just have him face me and I can pop that baby off right now." Clapping his hands together and waiting for both Magnus and Rodimus to get into position, Wheeljack raised his hands. He paused when Rodimus flinched and waited for him to relax before sliding his fingers along his neck. When they dug deeper into his neck cables, he started to whimper.

He hadn't realized he was digging his fingers into his thighs until Magnus' hand scooped his little one up. Offering up thick fingers to squeeze instead, Magnus ran his thumb over the tip of Rodimus' hand soothingly. It had helped a little bit, but when a soft click sounded, Rodimus clenched a thick finger.

"So, each cable needs to be unclipped manually. Whatever control they have that does them all at once would take too long for me to make so I just figured out the pattern they all unlatch." Another click, and then a third, and Wheeljack kept untangling the cables one by one. Over time the pressure on Rodimus' neck suddenly lessened and he felt the cool air of the lab flood around his cables. "See some of them intertwine, and if they are not separated properly, they rip out the energon lines. It's horrifically clever, but not enough for me. It's just a simple sequence." He kept popping them free until finally, the collar hissed and popped open, dropping to the floor with a loud *clang*.

He hadn't realized how heavy the collar was until it was gone and his neck was free. The air burned at his exposed neck cables, but he didn't care. Was he really feeling it? Was he really free?

Raising his hands up and pausing just before his neck, Rodimus touched at the neck cables. Again it burned, as the stripped wires were exposed, but again, he didn't care. It was gone, he was light and free.

"As I thought." Wheeljack hummed, leaning in and rubbing his chin as he examined the neck cables. "His vocalizer is crushed, way beyond what I can do. If Ratchet was here *maybe* he could fix it but-" He shrugged. "I'll put a new one on order. I have his model now from the scan, should take a few days to come in. For now," Wheeljack reached out to Rodimus' neck, touching the exposed wires, "make sure these cables stay bandaged and clean. They will heal on their own but are subject to infection." Taking some bandages off his little tray, he wrapped the cables, ignoring Rodimus' hiss of pain. "I'll ping you when it has arrived."

"Thank you Wheeljack, thank you." Standing, Magnus kept Rodimus in his arms, swinging his legs up to carry him bridal style. "I owe you for this."

"Nah, you just keep doin' you Mags." Slapping Magnus' backside, Wheeljack laughed nervously when he got a dirty look.

As Magnus stepped forwards towards the door, he didn't notice Rodimus looking over his shoulder, optics locked on the collar on the floor.

Chapter 7

He hadn't even made it more than three blocks before Rodimus had fallen asleep against him. Utterly exhausted by the Day's events and sore from Wheeljack prodding him, he had succumbed to recharge the moment it had crept over him. Perhaps it was for the best, and a part of Magnus had been relieved the moment he had stepped out of the lab that Rodimus made no noise of protest to being carried. Instead he clung to the larger mech, resting his head against his massive shoulder and allowed himself to be carried.

For the first two blocks he had tried his best to stay awake, but his optics dimmed and Magnus' smooth strides lulled him into a much needed recharge. Perhaps a past version of himself would have forced himself awake, but oddly enough he had never felt safer than against that massive blue chestplate.

A part of him still squirmed at the feeling of Magnus' massive hand pressed against the small of his back, keeping him secure against him, but every few minutes he would rub his spinal strut soothingly. Taking care not to touch either of Rodimus' spoilers, Magnus had just tried his best to focus on getting him home. At least there he wouldn't feel as tense and exposed.

He had thought about transforming, but the prospect of waking Rodimus from his sleep and jostling him about while driving kept him from doing so. Plus, a part of him was enjoying the fact Rodimus was cuddled against him. Not wanting to ruin the rare moment, each step careful and calculated until finally he had reached the apartment complex.

He had ignored the questioning glances others had given him as he moved through the front lobby, knowing how odd the sight of him carrying another fully grown mech must look. It didn't matter, and once he was alone in the elevator he released a soft sigh of relief.

"We're almost home, just a bit further." Magnus spoke softly as the elevator moved upwards and slowed at his designated floor. A soft ping sounded before the doors opened and he stepped out, moving immediately towards his apartment door. He was delighted when the hallway came up bare, leaving no more mechs to stare at him with question.

Awkwardly punching in the door code, Magnus stepped inside of his home and closed the door behind him. Once locked, he moved towards the sofa and, as carefully as possible, laid Rodimus down on it so he could rest.

He looked so different now without the heaviness of the collar taking up a decent amount of his neck. In fact before Magnus could barely even see any part that made up Rodimus' neck before the collar had been removed. With it gone Rodimus looked like less like a slave and more like a mech who wandered the Dead End. That thought was something that could be changed over time. Hopefully within the next few days and with a bit of patience, Rodimus would recover even further.

Now, he looked skinnier, and the golden collar that made up Rodimus actual armor was significantly more visible. Perhaps at one point it was even beautiful, but now it was a dull mustard color like the rest of him. Speckled with spots of rust, it was obvious where the collar had been placed. A clear ring of wear was still visible, nothing but exposed and raw wires were to be found along his neckline. Of course this was easily taken care of now that the collar was off, but there were still clear signs of other problems.

Rodimus had outgrown his current armor as evident by the cables popping from certain seams

all around his body. Cables jutted from his hips, every joint, and all around his shoulders, only making it more evident that Rodimus was desperate for an upgrade. No doubt he lived uncomfortably, crushed inside of his own body, and perhaps his small stature was due to lack of upgrades. Magnus could only hope he would flourish once he was properly taken care of. That was the least he could hope for, was for the little mech to at least *grow*.

Optics wandering to Rodimus' discolored belly, Magnus could only sigh. It looked *worse* now that Wheeljack had prodded at it. The weld had swollen and the usual gross color had darkened even further. The potentially lovely red had tinted an alarming gray, even black in some areas. Spreading some medical grade on it would help bring down the swelling and discoloration, but when it came down to it the underlying problem had to be solved for it to be completely resolved. Constantly putting a band-aid over the issue wasn't going to make things any better and allowing it to continue to corrode further wasn't the best option either. Something had to be done, and soon.

For once in a long time, maybe even the first time, he wasn't sure if he had made the responsible choice. He had hoped he had picked the lesser of two evils, but when it came down to it, the seal would have to go at some point. Sure there was the hope that Rodimus' body could dissolve it on its own, but that outcome seemed grim. Regardless, he seemed cornered, but at least he had a few days to try and convince Rodimus to break the seal rather than suffer.

In a few days Rodimus would have a new vocalizer, and hopefully in that small window Magnus could decide what is best to do.

With a soft sigh, Magnus reached down and took Rodimus little hand into his own. Running his massive thumb over scuffed knuckles, he knelt down and pulled Rodimus' hand up towards his lips. Leaving about an inch of space, he paused, just staring at Rodimus fever pink cheeks. Glossed with a light sheen of sweat, Magnus had made a note to draw a bath for Rodimus later. Hopefully the water and some medical grade mixed in would help his sore body. It was the least he could do until he thought of a better solution to present itself.

Pressing his lips against Rodimus' knuckles, Magnus kissed each and every one of them before tucking Rodimus hand back against his body. Nice and snug.

Pulling a blanket off the top of the sofa, he draped it over the hot rod and tucked him in. Rubbing the tip of his golden crest, Magnus finally left him alone to rest.

He had woken feeling slightly disoriented and light headed. Something felt off and despite onlining his optics and staring at the ceiling he wasn't quite sure where he was. In fact he wasn't sure at all what had happened in the last few hours, everything had seemed so surreal. Had it all just been some fever dream? Almost right away he knew he was in Magnus' apartment and on his sofa, had he just dreamt it all?

Sitting up took perhaps more effort than it should have for him to sit up, but almost immediately he noticed something was different. He was lighter, and his neck felt... *cold*. A phantom itch had surrounded his neck, and when he tilted his head downwards he noticed right away the range of his head movements had suddenly increased.

The collar.

Hands snapping upwards, Rodimus' fingers touched exposed cables where the collar should have been sitting. Despite the painful zing he received for touching the cables, he didn't pull away, not believing what he was feeling. Bare metal.

Was it really gone? It didn't feel like it was there, but was it actually gone? His fingers came up bare when it came to the harsh metal of the collar, but there was still a phantom sensation, and that had him doubting everything.

Tossing the blanket off his frame and pushing himself onto his feet, Rodimus rushed towards the washroom. Flicking on the light as he entered, he moved towards the sink and grasped the porcelain so hard it threatened to crack.

Optics flickering at the sight, his knees suddenly felt weak. Spark twisting in disbelief, he collapsed onto his knees. Pressing his forehead against the sink's edge, he breathed hard, not believing his optics.

It *was* gone.

Clambering back to his feet, he tried not to look in the mirror right away again, too afraid his optics might have tricked him, but when he finally did look again it had been true. The contraption was gone, and this time he really was *free*. There was nothing threatening him now, no Masters who would find him, no collar to tear his cables out if he tried to remove it himself. No control to do just that if he disobeyed. He was free, finally *free*.

Swallowing hard, Rodimus just stared at himself in the mirror, optics scrutinizing every little bit of his neck he hadn't seen in years. A part of him felt a little exposed, not used to the sudden openness of his cables, but he was more than happy to get used to it.

Fingers ghosted along where the collar had sat, pausing briefly at each spot of rust. Touching it hurt, and the armor crumbled away under the slightest touch. Around the sides of his head where his natural collar was at its tallest there were large chunks of metal missing, no doubt cut away during his processing into the Stock system to allow the collar to fit better around him. Over time the cut metal had corroded and become brittle, flaking away as he touched it. He considered himself lucky the rust had only seemed to affect the outer layer of his armor and had yet to reach his protoform to cause yet another infection.

If Magnus kept up on his promises and he was due a new paint job soon, the brittle armor would be replaced easily enough. For now it was the least of his problems, so he moved his fingers away from it and continued to trace over throbbing cables. Despite how much it stung, he couldn't help himself, touching everything and anything he could.

The door leading into the washroom creaked open as Magnus stepped through, abruptly stopping the moment he saw Rodimus standing in front of the mirror.

"Oh good, you're awake." Pushing the door open a little wider, Magnus abruptly paused and stepped back. "I apologize, I should have knocked first. That was rude of me." Bowing his head and looked back up to Rodimus who showed him no ill look. Instead the hot rod's spoiler fluttered and he made no noise of distress. "How are you feeling?" His face was soft and his voice was concerned but at no point did he enter the washroom. Instead he stood outside the threshold, waiting to see what Rodimus would do.

Staring at Magnus for a few seconds, Rodimus turned back towards the mirror and looked at himself once more. This time he squinted, as if making *sure* what he was seeing was really real. All too often his tormented mind had played tricks on him, and this was one he hoped was real.

Is this real? Is this... really real?

Without turning around, Rodimus pointed to his neck, looking through the mirror to see Magnus stand up straight behind him. At first he seemed confused, but further pointing had him realizing Rodimus was pointing at the bare space around his neck.

"The collar?" He watched Rodimus nod, not quite pulling his attention away from the mirror and the reflection of himself. Afraid if he had done so the collar might manifest right back on his neck he kept staring. "It's gone. It's really gone." A part of him was a bit worried Rodimus didn't seem to recollect the hours beforehand, but Magnus had chalked it up to the stress of the situation. "You don't have to worry about it anymore." Blinking as he noticed Rodimus' spoiler suddenly fluttering faster than before, Magnus felt his spark pulse. It had been rare for Rodimus to raise his spoiler higher than his midsection, and as of right now it flapped upwards in delight.

Vocalizer clicking and peeping, Rodimus touched all over his exposed neck, his expression changing from disbelief to delight. He opened his mouth as if to laugh but nothing more than a few static pops and clicks came out.

Leaning against the door frame, Magnus felt a small smile of his own creep up along one side of his mouth. It hadn't lasted long as he continued to watch Rodimus gently bounce in place, his damaged spoiler not rising as high as the other one. Instead it sagged, barely moving, the dents still crushed into the metal still looking like a massive hand had grabbed it.

Recovery was slow, and they still had a long way to go, and Magnus couldn't be sure they were completely out of the woods. He still had no idea *who* Rodimus was or why he ended up stuck in the slave trade. Was he an Autobot or a Decepticon, not that that had mattered at this point, but he was still a mystery. There could have been a platoon looking for him, friends, a colony who had lost him, someone might be missing him. Or, there could be nobody.

Spark sinking, Magnus pushed himself up and away from the door frame. Taking the doorknob, he pushed the door open a little wider to signal to Rodimus it was time to go.

"Come on Roddy," Turning away from the mirror, Rodimus looked at Magnus, his single undamaged spoiler flapped up in attention, "let's get your neck cleaned and bandaged. No more touching it, you're going to make it worse." The last thing he needed right now was for Rodimus' neck to get as bad as his abdomen.

Sidestepping to allow Rodimus out of the washroom, Magnus followed him into the living room. Without having to ask, Rodimus sat himself on the edge of the sofa and waited patiently for Magnus to start.

"Alright," Sitting on the edge of the coffee table in front of Rodimus, Magnus set a white box down on his lap, "A lot of the damage can't be fixed until the new vocalizer is installed, but tending to the worn cables to stop further infection is the best we can do. Wheeljack will replace the more damaged cables, this," Magnus said as he flipped the lid of the box open and pulled out a small jar of medical grade, "will at least help your body's natural nanites heal with smaller wounds." Unscrewing the lid off, Magnus tilted the jar towards Rodimus so he could see the inside.

He didn't doubt Rodimus knew what it was, he wasn't stupid, but for the sake of making sure he felt safe, he took it slow. He was pleased when Rodimus tilted his head up and looked at the light purple liquid, significantly thicker than regular energon, specifically designed to smear onto things.

"Lift your chin for me." Reaching out and placing the side of his massive finger under Rodimus' chin, Magnus gently tilted the hot rod's head up. Almost immediately that happy visage Rodimus had toted around flickered.

Visibly nervous about Magnus' massive hands, he tried his best to shake it off, holding as still as possible for the massive mech.

It's fine.

He swallowed hard, feeling Magnus try to tilt his chin up a little more to expose a larger portion of his neck. Without meaning too, he resisted, subconsciously not wanting to expose that part of himself again.

You're fine.

He tilted his head up further, his optics shuddering slightly as he felt the cool air of the apartment sting at his exposed cables.

"Good, just like that." Magnus removed his finger from Rodimus' chin and brought it down inside the jar of medical grade. Taking a generous helping of the goopy substance, he extracted his finger and moved back towards Rodimus' neck.

The initial feeling was cold as the medical grade came into contact, and then the sudden burn as it smeared along the stripped wires. Despite Magnus' gentle touch, Rodimus felt his vocalizer suddenly throb and ache.

Gentle fingers became harsh, and the Magnus in front of him seemed to glitch and transform. Every blink, Magnus seemed to change, his concerned face transforming into a masked figure. Massive and looming, a blaring red visor took the place of soft blue optics. The hands attempted to heal him were squeezing him, holding him in place.

Pulsating behind destroyed cables, his systems jolted and he jerked back, hands shoot up to clutch and hide his neck. Turning away from Magnus, he winced, his spoiler sagging abruptly.

"Szk-" He couldn't help the sudden spurt of static and frantic clicks, his vocalizer objecting to the touch. Despite having turned away and shielding himself, he could still feel the tight grasp of massive fingers wrapping around him. They squeezed harder and harder until he was sure his throat was closing on him.

I can't breathe! I- I can't-

The phantom hand around him kept squeezing and he wheezed, his own little fingers pulling at his neck in an attempt to get what was choking him off, but he came up empty again and again.

Stop!

Optics snapping shut, the Crimson mech filled his mind's eye, two massive red hands pinning him and squeezing so hard he was sure he would pop.

Stop it! Please!

"Roddy." The pressure around his intake is gone, and air flooded back into his systems. Closed vents popped open and a hot gust of air escaped Rodimus' tense frame.

Disoriented, Rodimus' optics flickered back online. Spotting the arm of the sofa, he was

confused until he heard Magnus' comforting voice once more to his side.

"You're alright." Having removed his hands upon the first notice of the panic attack, Magnus had sat back, attempting to give Rodimus some space to breathe. "It's just the two of us." Keeping his voice low, Magnus waited for Rodimus to sit forward and face him, but his frame had sagged. Any shred of delight that he had expressed earlier was gone, and he shook in place, holding himself. That sweet little smile was gone, now replaced with a fine line that wobbled in torment. Only after a few sharp breaths did he relax and return to his normal sitting position.

"May I continue," He made no move to continue without Rodimus giving him the okay to do so, "I'm almost done. Just a little more and then you can rest." He waited, relieved when Rodimus leaned forward and lifted his chin.

At all costs Rodimus kept his gaze from crossing Magnus', as if afraid he might think less of him. It was foolish, and he knew it, but he couldn't help it. As if Magnus would judge him for the sudden outburst, he couldn't face him.

"If something is really bothering you, stop me. I don't want to hurt you." He knew that, and Magnus hadn't hurt him, he just was unable to function the way he wanted too. "I'm going to touch your neck now." Magnus warned in advance this time, gently reaching forwards as Rodimus let his optics flutter offline.

He held still this time, taking deep breaths and wincing when Magnus' fingers grazed over a particularly sensitive area. Each flinch was met with Magnus pausing and allowing Rodimus to get his bearings back and settle, then he continued.

"Alright," Rodimus online his optics when he felt Magnus pull away, "Just the mesh patches now and then I'll leave you alone. You've been poked and prodded enough for one week, right?" He didn't expect any kind of answer from Rodimus, and he didn't get one. Instead Rodimus just stared at him with fever pink cheeks, his face barren of any expression.

Taking out several medium sized square patches from the white box in his lap, Magnus worked on peeling the adhesive back off. Once removed, he leaned in towards Rodimus and placed the patches over every single cable he treated with medical grade.

"Mmzk-" It was a half hearted whine, but Rodimus held still for the last bit of repair.

"I know, I know, they don't feel great." Rubbing each patch to make sure they were secured in place, Magnus finally sat back with a sigh. "It's a necessary evil." Closing the lid to his medical kit, Magnus gave it a gentle pat. "Hopefully in a few days your neck will have healed enough you won't need the patches, but for now it's important they don't get infected."

Expression blank, Rodimus leaned back into the plush pillows that made up the back of the sofa. Keeping his optics away from Magnus, he focused on a random spot of the carpet.

He picked at his natural golden collar, peeling large pits of flaking paint away. Strip after strip, he scratched at his chestplate, itching the area a faction insignia might have been.

"I haven't forgotten about the paint job." Rodimus' eyes lifted from the carpet now and locked with Magnus'. "I know I said when the collar came off we would go, and we will," Leaning back and taking in a deep breath, Magnus locked optics with the large weld along Rodimus' belly, "but there is more that has to be done before we can do that." Rodimus' eyes averted themselves again; despite his face being blank Magnus could sense his disappointment. "You know the seal has to be taken care of before we can get you fitted with new armor. As much as you need it, you *have* to be

repaired first." Rodimus' nose scrunched, not wanting to hear what Magnus was saying. "This isn't something that can wait, Rodimus this really needs to be addressed. You *have* to make a choice." He tried to keep the urgency down in his voice, knowing that if in any way he raised it he might scare Rodimus. The last thing he wanted was for him to be thrown into a full blown panic and hurt himself.

Standing up, Rodimus shoved his way past Magnus, his frame jerking to a halt when the massive mech snagged his wrists. He tried to wrench himself free, only earning a tighter grip.

"Rodimus," It took little to no effort to hold Rodimus in place, too weak to pull away from him even when he was barely squeezing, "Please, let me help you. You *know* I'm not here to hurt you. Why won't you just let me help you with this last thing? Wheeljack will take good care of you, I promise. I won't let anything bad happen to you ever again. You're safe; you just have to let me *help* you." Rodimus kept tugging, his face getting more and more distressed the longer Magnus held him. His spoiler flapped and he opened his mouth to let out a mess of static that Magnus no doubt was a series of curses if they were audible.

It had been the first time Rodimus had ever bared his teeth at him, displaying two little fangs that were not quite as intimidating as a Decepticon's natural canines. Though it did get the point across to Magnus that he was feeling threatened.

Releasing Rodimus' hand, Magnus watched the hot rod stumble back a step and turn on his heels. Flipping his spoiler up and flapping it in frustration, he stalked over to his usual spot by the window. Letting his spoiler drop down to its lowest point, he crossed his arms and just stared out to the streets below.

"Roddy." Standing and moving closer to Rodimus, Magnus stopped when he saw his spoiler quivering. Perhaps it was best to leave it alone for now. There was nothing good that would come of irritating the situation any further, it would be best to let Rodimus cool down and relax. He would try talking to him again later.

With a soft sigh, Magnus turned away from Rodimus and started towards his office. If he gave Rodimus enough space to relax maybe later he could talk to him again, try and convince him. At least now he had some time to try and think of what to say to get him to come around. He just had to be patient, with all things relating to Rodimus, it was a waiting game. He had already made great progress; there was no need to shove. Rodimus would eventually come around; at least Magnus hoped he would, for both of their sakes.

It hadn't been until the middle of the night that he reemerged from his office, the weight of recharge finally drawing him out. Having managed to get little to nothing done when it came to finding out anything else he could about his stubborn little hot Rod, Magnus decided to call it a night.

Upon stepping into the hall he yawned and made his way into the living room, pausing when he noticed Rodimus wasn't by the window any longer. It wouldn't have been strange if the Holo screen had been on, as Rodimus had finally grown comfortable enough to use the sofa, but he wasn't on it either.

Instead, he was curled up in an almost-fetal position close to the coffee table, his arms

wrapped protectively around his midsection as if somebody was going to sneak in and tear his seal while he slept.

Spark sinking, Magnus frowned. He thought they had moved past the whole “sleeping on the floor” thing. He didn't think the conversation earlier would have sent Rodimus’ trust backwards to where they had first started. He should have known by now Magnus meant well, right?

Stepping closer and kneeling down by Rodimus frame, Magnus reached his hand out and gently placed it on Rodimus' shoulder. Immediately he was met with burning armor, damp with sweat as the fever had no doubt reared its head again.

"Tsk." He would have to try and get Rodimus to drink medical grade in the morning, if he could. He had hoped the regression to sleeping on the floor didn't extend to him not wanting to eat again. Magnus would handle this little tantrum, but if Rodimus didn't fuel in his deteriorating state things would surely only get worse faster.

A soft whimper slipped past Rodimus' mouth and his cheek twitched and fingers twitched. His face scrunched every few minutes and then he relaxed, falling silent for a few minutes before once again whimpering and twitching.

Scooping the little mech up into his arms, Magnus stood and cradled him close. He had half expected Rodimus to wake up and his vocalizer once more spit static curses at him, but instead his whimpers settled and his body's twitching slowed.

"Shh," Magnus cooed so softly he wasn't even sure he said it aloud, "I'm sorry." Pressing his lips to Rodimus' sweaty forehead, Magnus moved towards the sofa. Carefully he set the Hot Rod down on it, not wanting to jostle him too much.

Rodimus' bed would have been a better place for him to sleep, but for the sake of making sure he didn't wake up, Magnus made him comfortable once more on the sofa. Plus, if Rodimus needed him, he was a lot easier to get to.

Picking up the crumpled blanket that had been kicked to the floor earlier in the day, Magnus gave it a small shake and then tossed it over Rodimus frame. Once loosely tucked in, Magnus stepped back and placed his hand on Rodimus head to pet him affectionately.

"Goodnight, Rodimus." Allowing his hand to slip away from Rodimus' head, Magnus turned towards his room. Leaving the door slightly ajar, he himself climbed into bed.

"Come on! Come on!" He couldn't run as fast as he wanted, not with his left thigh torn open during the shuttles crash landing. Having been rendered down to a painfully slow trot with an agonizing limp, he wasn't getting anywhere quickly. "Faster! Come on!" He panted, panicking as he realized he really had nowhere to go.

It had started with a Decepticon ambush that had left their ship practically in pieces. Their quantum engines so badly damaged they were only able to jump a small distance away, but at the time it had been enough to at least get away from the Decepticons. The small jump had seemed like a good idea to at least get the far enough they could repair and jump further out of unknown territory, but in the end, it was fruitless.

They had been attacked a second time not long after their jump, this time by unmarked ships which Rodimus would later find out were scavengers, slavers, the worst of the worst.

It had been pointless to try and outrun them, as the ship was already limping and running out of backup power. All they could do was take the ships and try to direct the ship towards the closest planet.

The atmosphere had torn the ships apart upon entry, breaking it into smoldering pieces and raining it down upon the uncharted planet's surface.

At the time all he could remember was the screaming, the crew struggling to keep the ship together despite the floor splitting below their very feet. The screaming had faded, nothing but ringing filling his audio as the ground drew closer and closer, and then nothing but darkness as they crashed.

He had woken to the ground shaking below his cheek, pressed into the damp soil of a planet he didn't know the name of. Not quite online his optics, he wondered for a moment if he was really still alive or if this was some twisted nightmare.

Optics dimming to life, everything around him was fuzzy, and despite him shuttering his optics and resetting them twice, the world continued to swirl around him.

He could make out massive gray blotches with smoke billowing around them, and at no point did he doubt it had been chunks of the now destroyed ship. Flames burst from certain sections of the chunks, licking at the sky furiously, turning the sky above black.

Movement in the distance caught Rodimus' attention and again he tried to blink his optics clear in hopes of identifying it better.

The blobs moved back and forth, some bending down and tossing large scraps of metal aside to extract something from the wreckage.

"Is it in good enough shape?" The voice was barely audible and Rodimus' audio. "Can we sell it?" Squinting, Rodimus spotted the familiar shape of a mech he had been stationed with on the ship.

"Missing an arm but I think it's just offline, should be good to sell." The blob handed the mech off to several other blobs behind it. "Keep looking, there's got to be more here. I want this place stripped off all metal and all the crew harvested."

The blobs shifted, some picking up more metal, others turning towards the direction Rodimus had been facing down in the dirt.

Get up Rodimus.

Spark pounding behind his chestplate, Rodimus dug his fingers into the dirt, struggling to push himself off. Warning after warning blared across his HUD, excessive armor damage, mass energon loss, internal and external trauma, the warnings persisted.

Immediate upon standing and stepping forward, Rodimus collapsed onto his hands and knees, his left leg surging with agony. He wailed a lot louder than he wanted to, slamming his fist down into the dirt as the pain continued to radiate up to his hip.

Looking down between his arms and legs, he spotted a large chunk of shrapnel jutting out of his left thigh. Much like a shard of glass, it had imbedded itself past his armor and deep into the

sensitive mesh of his protoform.

"Someone's over there," The voice from one of the gray blobs Rodimus' had heard spoke suddenly closer than before, "I see one! Get it!"

Snagging the shard of metal, Rodimus yanked it from his thigh with a sharp scream. Throwing it to the side and throwing his body up, he forced his body forward. Stride after stride he tried to run faster, his pace impeded by his wound.

Bounding through the wreckage, Rodimus heaved, his spark throbbing a mile a minute as he tried to pick which way to go. When it came down to it, it didn't matter. There was no way to escape, with the ship destroyed and it unlikely this was even an inhabited planet, the outcome was grim. There was still the hope that there was a colony somewhere on the planet, but that hope only mattered if he could get to it and away from who was after him.

The ship- or at least what part of the ship Rodimus had been located in- had crash-landed in what appeared to be a forest. Packed densely together with trees larger than he had ever seen, he had been hopefully he could use them as cover.

"Don't lose him!" The voices were even closer now, and as Rodimus glanced over his shoulder to try and see just how close, something searing hot erupted against his shoulder.

"AH!" The blaster shot knocked him off balance, sending a shock through his system that had his body momentarily freezing as he came crashing down to the ground. His body rolled and he felt the ground under him suddenly vanish as he rolled off a ledge.

Frame falling, he tried to grab at the ledge, missing by a mile and instead continuing to roll down the ledges side. He bounced, the planet's' surface crumbling with each impact as he hit each small little lip.

Coming down hard at the bottom of the incline, he wailed as he landed hard on one spoiler, bending the sensitive metal right in half. He rolled twice, finally sliding to a stop in the middle of a small clearing.

Systems rattled, his body jerked as the blast from the stun gun jolted his systems. Sending his visual feed into a flutter, everything around him swirled and warped.

As he started to pick himself up, a heavy foot stomped down by his head, several claws decorating the end. Right away he could tell it was organic, and gray.

"Nowhere left to run." The alien grabbed Rodimus by the back of the neck, making sure to slam his face into the dirty before yanking him to his feet.

"Ngn!" Fist clenched, Rodimus swung, his knuckles connecting with something soft. He didn't hold back, instead he put all of his weight into it, slamming the thing that had grabbed him so hard in what he hopped was the face. "Get off!" He spat, watching as the organic alien stumbled back a few feet from him.

The bushes around them rustled, and more aliens looking like the one Rodimus had managed to clock surrounded them. They grunted, almost egging on what was happening.

"Looks like we have a hot one!" One from the onlooking crowd hooted, several others hooting in response to him as they seemed to take pleasure in cornering the mech. "Get him!"

They were on him faster than he could process, several sliding down the hill and latching onto

him one after another. They grabbed for his arms, his legs, and his midsection, trying their best to restrain him as he thrashed.

"Get off! Get off of me!" Rodimus thrashed, feeling them shove him from one side to another, tormenting him. They kept hooting, some rushing in to get a swing at him, but he retaliated, punching and kicking back the best he could, but it was useless. He was outnumbered, wounded, and trapped, and they knew it.

"Look at the little Autobot go!" He heard one of the aliens squeal, utterly amused at the struggle. "Go Autobot, go!" The hooting grew louder as Rodimus thrashed harder, screaming each time he tore an alien off and sent it to the ground.

"Enough toying with the merchandise," A deeper, voice sounded, and Rodimus could barely look up during the assault to see a much larger gray alien emerge from the bushes, "bag it and tag it like the rest of the stock you found. We don't have time for this; the sooner we get the goods dropped off the sooner we get paid." The massive alien turned away from the hooting crowd. "We have to move out before an Autobot search crew comes across this mess. So get moving!" The aliens around purred in response, their sudden barrage against Rodimus halting.

As quickly as they had overwhelmed Rodimus, they had backed off. Creating a ring around the panting and exhausted Autobot, they trapped him.

Launching forward in an attempt to break the ring and escape, Rodimus screamed and raised his fist. Before he could bring it forward to connect with an alien's face, something snagged it and jerked him back. Before he could register what it was, another snagged his neck, then his other wrist and he was yanked to the ground.

"Yeah! Get him!" The hooting picked up as catch pole after catch pole was lassoed around Rodimus limbs. With a hard yank he was taken down to his knees.

"No!" Rodimus screamed, yanking on his arms, "I won't go!" He yanked harder, some of the aliens struggling to hold him. "I won't!" Get off me! Let go of me!" His spark felt like it would burst from his chest, and he arched, screaming again into the sky.

Steam wafted from the seams between Rodimus' armor, wafting up in thick clouds.

"I won't..." He snarled, optics flaring as he started to stand. "I won't go..." His knees popped and his back strained under his own weight, but he would stand if it was the last thing he would do.

"He's getting up, zap him!" As Rodimus was halfway to standing, the catch poles suddenly tightened. Each line connecting to Rodimus erupted in a bright white light, and a high frequency shock rattled him.

The electric shock forced his joints to freeze, and he wailed. His armor expanded, the shock overloading his systems.

As quickly as it had started, it was over, and he was left standing there, optics offline, rocking slightly back and forth. Frame scalded and steaming, his knees buckled and he fell forwards. Ending how he had started, face down in the dirt.

Optics flickering, unable to control them or his bodies random jerks in response to the shock, all he could do was lay there and pant.

"Just be a good little slave and cooperate, it will be easier for you. All your little friends are

being good." An alien squatted down by Rodimus' head, a clawed hand stroking his head. It tapped lightly as if to consider him, then dug in painfully.

Glaring, Rodimus lifted his head and spat energon into the alien's face and immediately was met with another painful shock to his systems.

Frame sagging as the shock ended, his optics flickered, slowly falling offline. Energon oozed from his nose and mouth, staining the ground below him.

"This one's feisty," Wiping his face, the alien stood back up, "needs to be broken and put in place. Send him to the warehouse for processing, should be a good time breaking him." They howled around him snorting and stomping at the idea.

His frame was dragged forward through the dirt, and no matter how much he told his body to move, his limbs would not obey.

"No..." He croaked, his fingers the only thing he could dig into the dirt but it did little to stop them from taking him. "No."

At first he wasn't exactly sure what he had been hearing, but it became apparent when the second noise was very clearly a distressed whimper.

Bringing his optics halfway online, he stared at the wall and listened for the noise, hearing it again after a brief pause. It was muffled, some noises louder than others, and no real pattern to it.

Leaning over the edge of his bed, Magnus narrowed his vision on the floor, examining it for any sign of Rodimus. When he realized Rodimus wasn't there, he sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed to stand.

Walking around his bed towards the door leading out into the living room, Magnus paused briefly. Tilting his head towards the crack in the door, he listened once more. Nothing but silence for the first few seconds, and then that familiar whimper he had come to know as Rodimus' vocalizer struggling to make noise.

In the past few weeks he had grown accustomed to hearing Rodimus whimper in his sleep, but something was different. Normally the whimpers were soft and reserved to quiet mumbles, but tonight, they seemed frantic and loud. Some seemed like screams cut off before they could form, and it made his spark sink.

Opening the door and looking out into the living room, Magnus spotted Rodimus right away where he had left him.

No longer was he curled up in the fetal position, instead his body was flared out against the sofa. Limbs spread all over, he had at some point managed to kick the blanket off himself.

"Roddy-" Magnus spoke softly as he stepped closer, watching the smaller mech's frame jerk. His face was distressed, and sweat had drenched his body, leaving him looking glossy. Though that hadn't been the strangest thing, no, what was odd was the amount of steam expelling from all of Rodimus' seams.

Perturbed, Magnus knitted his eyebrows together, not sure exactly what he was seeing. Panic set in a second later when he realized Rodimus must have been overheating to a critical point. Never before had he seen a mech *steam* as much as Rodimus was in that moment.

"Rodimus-" Reaching out and touching Rodimus' shoulder, Magnus almost snapped his hand back when the tips of his fingers were burned.

Armor searing hot to the touch, Magnus felt his spark jump in his chest. *How* was he that hot? It didn't make sense how he was practically on fire.

"Mhzk-" Face twisting in distress, Rodimus body jerked again. His mouth opened and he looked like he was screaming.

"Rodimus!" Grabbing Rodimus' shoulders and giving him a light shake, Magnus kept calling to him. "Come on Roddy, wake up."

The look of distress only emphasized on the Hot Rods face, and he started to squirm. The steam grew thicker and thicker and Rodimus' plating grew hotter and hotter. The heat growing so intense that Magnus could feel it radiating up and against his own chest. "Rodimus please, wake up!" If he kept heating the way he was he was headed for a core meltdown. "Rodimus!" Magnus practically shouted, shaking the little mech a bit harder.

Rodimus' whimpers increased, and he tossed his head back and forth, his hands clenching and unclenching rapidly. He screamed, but it's glitched and chopped into pieces, his hands shooting up to grab Magnus' forearms.

"Rodimus! Wake up! It's me!" Magnus felt panic crushing him as Rodimus face looked tormented, all the color having been drained from it. "Rodi-" He didn't get to finish, as a powerful wave of heat and flame erupted against him.

Flames poured from Rodimus' body, shoving Magnus and everything else around the little red mech's body back.

The flames kept coming, flaring out from Rodimus' body so hard his seams whistled.

Optics snapping online, Rodimus sat up, screaming as he looked at his arms, his hands, all on fire. Horror covered his face as he looked down, the rest of him on fire.

Having been pushed back from the blast, Magnus tripped over the coffee table, coming down hard on it and crushing it under his body.

The fire died down, receding back into Rodimus, seams, leaving him to just stare at his charred hands. Still smoking and littered with soot, he stared, optics wide, at himself.

W-What was...

Smoke wafted from his body, and he looked around, his body trembling as he noticed he had not only destroyed the sofa, wall, and part of the floor, but Magnus.

Laying flat on his back on top of a shattered table, Magnus shifted, groaning as his chest and face had been scorched. He had been lucky enough to have state of the art armor, leaving him crispy, but otherwise unharmed.

Getting up, Rodimus legs failed him as soon as he tried to put weight on them, sending him crashing down onto his hands and knees. Coolant had spilled over his optics, streaming down his

soot covered face as he crawled as quickly as he could to Magnus's side.

Nearly throwing himself over Magnus' front, he touched all over the massive mech's charred cheeks.

"Ssszk! Nkm! Zzzsk!" He tried to speak, nothing but gibberish escaping him as he patted Magnus' face, trying to draw him online.

"I'm alright..." Magnus groused coughing a bit of black smoke, his optics flickering to life and locking onto Rodimus distressed face. Thick tears rolled only an inch from his optics, dissolving against the still hot metal. "I'm alright." With a loud grunt, Magnus sat himself up from the remnants of his coffee table.

"Are you alright?" Magnus watched as Rodimus trembled in front of him, spoiler sagged to its lowest point. He wasn't surprised when Rodimus shook his head, more tears bursting from his optics. "Have you always been able to... do that?" Whatever that *was*, and again Rodimus shook his head.

Frame suddenly swaying, Rodimus' optics flickered. His expression softened and without warning he fell forwards.

"Roddy!?" Catching Rodimus against his chest, he felt the little mech sag as his systems offlined. "Rodimus!" Pulling the still boiling mech close, Magnus brought him up to his face. Pressing his cheek to Rodimus charred one, he rocked him. "Rodimus?" He tried to gently shake him away, but Rodimus' frame had shut down. Completely limp, his arms hug loosely from Magnus' grip. "What the *hell* is going on?" Magnus whispered into Rodimus' cheek.

Chapter 8

He paced up and down the hall, right arm slightly raised to his face as he waited for his com to confirm his call request. A call request that he had been trying to connect for the past hour, but no answer seemed to come.

"Come on Wheeljack." Magnus cursed under his breath, stalking up the hall once more as the call once again dropped and brought him to Wheeljack's messaging system. The obnoxious recording of Wheeljack's voice greeted him and he hung up, dialing again. "Just answer your damn com." Of all the times for Wheeljack to not be up in the middle of the night for no reason, it had to be *this* night. Everything had been a total nightmare, and there seemed little hope of waking up from it and things being better.

Pausing in his paces when he came close to his room, Magnus peered into where he had placed Rodimus on his bed. Too afraid to tuck him in incase he might combust again, he had just laid him as comfortable as possible along the comforter.

From his current position, Magnus could see Rodimus' chest plate rising and falling in a rapid manner as he panted. His cheeks were a bright red with fever, brighter than they had ever been before and the damp cloth Magnus had placed on his head did little if anything at all to cool him down.

Every few minutes, Magnus passed the room and would glance in to see Rodimus' frame start to steam again. The majority of the steam seemed secluded to Rodimus' golden collar or from around his chest plate and would dissipate within a few minutes of it starting. So far Rodimus hadn't combusted again, but every time he started to steam Magnus wasn't sure if it might escalate. What would he do if Rodimus kept catching on fire? Where could he take him?

The couch and coffee table had been a loss, but the apartment all together had somehow gone unscathed by Rodimus' episode and Magnus himself had gotten by with just minor burns. All together he counted himself and his belongings lucky.

"You've reached *Jackie~!*" Magnus scoffed as he once again as Wheeljack's messaging system picked up. Stomping his foot in frustration, he suffered through it and listened. When it finally finished and the soft tone pinged for him to leave his message, he began his desperate plea. Perhaps a little too desperate, as Magnus' voice cracked abruptly and he tried to clear his intake to sound a bit more professional.

"Wheeljack," Stalking down the hall into the main living room, Magnus stood by the massive window, "It's Ultra Magnus, this is urgent." Licking his lips, he continued. "Something is wrong with Rodimus, and I don't mean like before with the elevated fever or the purging. Something is really *wrong* with him. I don't think it has anything to do with the seal inside of him either. This is... new. I'm not exactly sure how to explain what happened but... he caught on fire." Pinching the bridge of nose, he continued. "I know that sounds strange, but he was *on fire*. Yes, his whole body was engulfed in flames. I don't think it has anything to do with his system overheating because he... he stood up and was functioning, he was awake and coherent. Whatever it was it... I don't know to be honest. I have *seen* a system shutdown due to overheating and it wasn't that. It couldn't have been." Pausing, Magnus just shook his head. "He looks worse; a lot worse than before. I fear whatever just happened to him is accelerating his decline in health. He was up and functioning after it happened but then he collapsed. It's been an hour and he still hasn't woken up, I think his system short circuited, I really don't know." Telling Wheeljack Rodimus looked worse was an understatement, he was far past *worse*. He looked like he was on the verge of

meeting his Maker if something wasn't done and done soon. "I'm worried; I don't think he's going to make it through the night. I don't know... I don't know what to do." His spark flipped in his chest. "Wheeljack, *please* ping me the moment you get this message. I really need your council on this. I don't think he will make the ride to Ratchet, I really don't think moving him is the best thing to do right now. To be honest I don't know what the right thing to do is." Begrudgingly, Magnus closed the com line and took a deep breath. Holding it tight in his chest, he finally let out a loud sigh. "Damn it all." Magnus cursed to himself for being so unsure of this whole situation. How could he have let things escalate to this point? Every other situation he was clear on his approach, everything thought through with almost the same accuracy as Prowl, but now, now it was a twisting maze with no hope of escape. At least in Rodimus' case. He was trapped with nowhere to go and at impossible odds.

"Skkz-" Magnus turned from the window and looked towards his room. "Mmnzzk-" The noise came again and right away he recognized it as Rodimus trying to say something.

"Roddy?" Heading back towards his room, Magnus pushed the door open slowly. Right away he could see Rodimus' optics struggling to stay online. They flickered and dimmed, sometimes shutting down completely. "Roddy?" Magnus kept his voice low as he stepped into the room, immediately he picked up the pace when he saw Rodimus reach out a little hand in his direction. "I'm here, I'm right here." Taking Rodimus' little hand into his own, Magnus squeezed it and continued to watch the little mech struggle to get his optics to cooperate.

"Szzk-" Shifting, Rodimus tried to sit up but was met with Magnus' massive free hand lightly pressing down on his chest.

Magnus? Mags... Mags where... where are-

"No, no, Roddy don't move, just relax. You're alright." He was pleased when Rodimus listened and laid back, his little hand going limp in Magnus' palm. His optics finally stabilized and remained online but had been lit so low they might as well have been offline. "That's it, good. Just relax." Setting Rodimus' hand down by his side, Magnus moved his hand to cup Rodimus' cheek instead.

He rubbed up and down soothingly, his hulking thumb rubbing tenderly under Rodimus' sunken optic. His cheek was damp and still as hot as ever, but at least not too hot to touch. He had cooled finally, but Magnus doubted he was out of the woods. His face was a sickening pale tone. His optics were glossy and fogged, despite him looking at Magnus, he wasn't sure he was actually *seeing* him at this point.

"How are you feeling?" He didn't expect a verbal answer, instead he was looking for any sign that Rodimus was actually aware of what was happening around him. Pleased when Rodimus blinked at the question and parted dry lips, Magnus nodded.

Removing the damp cloth from Rodimus' forehead, Magnus stepped away from the bed.

"I'll be right back-" Exiting the room for no more than a minute, Magnus returned with a glass half full of energon and a fresh cloth for Rodimus' forehead. "Here we go," Pulling up a chair to the side of the bed; Magnus sat down, "let's sit you up a bit so you can have a few sips." Sliding his hand under Rodimus' back, taking care not to touch his damaged spoiler, Magnus as gently as possible pushed Rodimus upward. He didn't need him to sit up all the way, just enough that he could press the glass to his lips without spilling the whole thing on him.

"Sszk... zzk." Rodimus' lips parted and his hands came up weakly only to immediately fall back by his sides as the effort to keep them up was too much.

"Just a little sip," Tilting the glass once it was against Rodimus' dry lips, he felt his spark sink when the energon only streamed down the sides of Rodimus' chin. Barely any managed to get into his mouth, and even then Rodimus didn't swallow. Instead it continued to leak from his mouth, leaving little droplets on his chest plate. "Rodimus, *please*," Magnus begged, "just a few sips, just *one* ." Something, anything, as long as he had something in his system to help boost his energy would be a blessing, but he wouldn't drink. He was too weak too, too weak to put the effort into moving his lips, too weak to swallow. It was like being back at square one all over again, and it was *frustrating*.

I can't... I can't do it, Mags.

Turning his head away from the glass, Rodimus just made a frail noise. He knew as well as Magnus it just wasn't going to happen, so Magnus pulled the glass away and set it on the nightstand. There was no point in trying to force him to drink. Rodimus in his current state was likely to purge it up or choke on it due to his inability to work up the energy to even swallow.

Laying Rodimus back down, Magnus turned and retrieved the fresh cloth he had gotten earlier. Draping it over Rodimus' forehead, Magnus used the old one to then clean the spilt energon off of his chin. He dabbed it here and there, wiping Rodimus' lips and then the few little droplets along his chest plate before sitting back in his chair with a defeated sigh.

Rodimus had stopped looking at him, or at least had stopped putting in the effort of looking at him and instead directed his questionable attention to the ceiling. When Magnus reached out and took his little hand into his big one once more, he still didn't look at him.

"Roddy," Magnus' voice was smooth and soft, "I don't know what to do." Squeezing Rodimus' little hand, Magnus lowered his head and pressed Rodimus' knuckles to his forehead as if it would help him think of a better solution to the situation.

Magnus' optics glowed faintly in the low light of the room. They wandered over Rodimus' frame only to come to a stop at the grotesque looking weld along the hot rod's belly.

It had gotten worse, much like the rest of his body; it had deteriorated even faster after Rodimus' flare out. The metal was warped and the inflamed armor had finally started to change color dramatically. Before at least it still harbored a bit of Rodimus' natural color, but now the metal much like Rodimus' face had faded to an alarming gray. It had spread up to his chest, and with time Magnus could only assume it would consume him.

Wincing, Magnus looked away, pressing Rodimus' hand a little harder into his forehead as if it would give him the answer. An answer that wasn't going to lead him to the choice he was ultimately going to have to make... for Rodimus' sake.

With Rodimus' body already struggling to keep the seal's infection at bay, there was no way it could even attempt to remedy whatever had happened earlier. That being said if it was even trying. From the looks of it, his body had or was going to give up. Whatever little flicker of spark Rodimus had left still burning behind his chest plate was probably dying out. If *something* wasn't done to ease the burden of his body, Magnus would find himself dealing with a colorless Rodimus by the morning.

Pulling Rodimus' hand down and pressing scuffed knuckles to his lips, Magnus kissed every single one. Despite Rodimus not looking at him, he felt the hot rod squeeze his hand in response to the sign of affection and worry.

"Rodimus," Taking in a massive breath through his nostrils, Magnus reached his free hand

out to touch Rodimus' side, "Let me help you." His fingers grazed by the gray metal, not quite touching it but letting Rodimus know what he meant. " *Please* , Roddy." Before the choice had been Magnus or Wheeljack, but now, it was Magnus or-

I know, Mags, I know. It's not good. You don't have to look at me... like that. I know.

Optics dimming offline, Rodimus grimaced. He curled his little fingers around one of Magnus' squeezing it as hard as he could. His chest rose and fell a bit more rapidly, but his head started to nod up and down slowly.

I'm... scared.

Coolant swelled below his optics and a thick tear rolled down his cheek. He felt Magnus' thumb brushing it away, and then another, and another. Each touch full of love and affection, something Rodimus had forgotten could exist.

For longer than he cared to remember he only knew the cruel touch of a Master of the Crimson mech's hand against his plating. Each touch would leave him crippled or sore, reminding him that he was really nothing more than a buy mech, but Magnus' touch was different. His weak spark flared behind his chest, fluttering with each and every gentle gesture. He had rejected it when he first met Magnus, too afraid it might leave him in agony like all the rest, but as of right now, he wanted nothing more than that hand comforting him.

With what bit of strength he had, he turned his head into Magnus' palm, nuzzling into it as he sobbed silently. Snot ran down from his nose and his lower lip quivered as he tried to stifle his pathetic sobs.

"Shh, it's alright Roddy. You're going to be alright." Magnus cooed as he leaned closer to the bed, wanting to comfort Rodimus as much as possible. "I promise, alright?" Stroking the side of Rodimus' sticky cheek with the sides of his fingers, Magnus managed a small smile when the hot rod's optics flickered back to life to look at him. "Everything is going to be just fine. You just need to hold on a little longer, okay?" He watched Rodimus struggle to nod into his palm. "Good." Bringing that little golden hand to his lips again, Magnus kissed it. "Just try to rest for a little bit longer." Rodimus' knuckles were cool against Magnus' lips, signaling his frame had finally settled. Good, it was going to be a rough few hours to come.

Standing, Magnus moved towards his closet and slid the door open. Withdrawing a blanket from the inside, he unfolded it and tossed it over Rodimus' body. Normally he would have tucked him in, but for the fear he might overheat again, Magnus let it drape off him loosely. Pulling Rodimus' arms out from the covers, he let them rest upon his chest and flipped the covers off his feet to let his frame get some air.

"I'll be back in a little bit." As Magnus spoke, Rodimus let his optics flicker offline, reserving what little energy he had left. He was going to need it.

The knob squeaked as he turned in and in a matter of moments water was spewing from the tub's faucet. With one hand, Magnus held a few fingers under the spray, waiting patiently for the water to get to a lukewarm temperature before closing the drain below.

The tub filled slowly, and when it was about one third of the way full, Magnus dipped his

hand into the water and nodded to himself. It wasn't at all boiling or hot, but a steady temperature, it was going to be important for what was to come, or at least he had hoped it would. In truth everything had been a guessing game, but hopefully after tonight it won't be any longer.

Pulling his hand from the water and reaching to his side, Magnus picked up a large medical-grade energon cube. At least twice the size of a regular cube, it fit just right in his palm. It had been a special reserve he had kept on his ship when he planned long trips away from home, barely used. If anything, it had served him as an extra spot to place papers, but tonight finally he could put it to some use.

Cracking the top of the cube and tilting it towards the tub, Magnus watched the watery green liquid pour out into the tub's water. It spread in a single spot, lingering a bit as Magnus dumped the entire container in and then set it back down by his side.

Turning the water off as the tub had reached half capacity, he stuck his hand into the water again and started to move it about. Dragging the medical grade from one side of the tub to the next, Magnus made sure to mix it in as best he could. When the tub's water was completely green and had a faint glow to it, he grunted in satisfaction at his work.

Standing up and turning towards a closet, Magnus moved his way over to it and opened it. Inside were several shelves with everything perfectly stacked next to one another and organized by size. Soaps and scrubs resided on the top shelves while on the lower shelves several different sized towels. Snagging two large towels and a facecloth, Magnus used his hip and then aft to close the closet behind him. Turning back towards the tub, he set the towels down on the floor and reached far to his left where the empty energon container had been set. Beside it were several regular sized medical grade cubes he had brought in just in case he would need them too. Even if everything did play out as planned, he was probably still going to need more energon than what he had dumped into the tub, so he had these little backups. Certainly not enough to turn the water as vivid of a green as it was now, but at least something to help dampen the blow to come.

Giving one final scan over everything he had set up to make sure everything was ready, Magnus nodded to himself. Taking in a deep breath and holding it inside for a few seconds, Magnus closed his optics and prepared himself for the next part.

Exhaling slowly, he turned towards the door and vanished out into the apartment for a few minutes. Upon entering the room, Magnus had Rodimus cradled in his arms. Tucked close to his chest protectively, he was held in a bridal style manner as the larger mech moved as smoothly as possible over to the tub.

"Mmnh-" Rodimus groaned against him, his head lulling lazily against Magnus' shoulder. Optics still half lit, Rodimus groaned again when Magnus jostled him a bit too much.

"I know, Roddy, I know." Any slight movement was agony, but it had to be done. "Just relax." Getting to the tubs edge, Magnus picked up one massive foot and stepped into the water. As carefully and as gently as his hulking frame would allow, he slowly sat and sank into the water.

The tub was large enough for Magnus of course- this *was* an apartment designed for a mech of his stature. This allowed him to sit and sink in the water without worry of being too cramped.

"Sszk-" Rodimus shifted as the water touched his aft first, and then pooled around his back as Magnus gently lowered the both of them into the water. Submerging Rodimus just above the abdomen, Magnus didn't move him right away. Instead he allowed Rodimus to just sit there and soak for a few minutes, allowing the medical grade to at least seep into some of his exposed seams and ease his frame's ache. At the very least Magnus hoped that the medicated water being exposed

to Rodimus' infected weld would slow its progression, but that was wishful thinking at this point.

Frame relaxing as the medical grade did its work, Rodimus let out a soft sigh. With barely lit optics, he tilted his head further into Magnus' shoulder, just wanting to stay like this a while, and Magnus allowed it. At least for a little while, but they would *have* to move on at some point. As much as Magnus wished this little soak would solve everything, it wasn't.

"Roddy," Reaching up with large fingers, Magnus stroked the side of Rodimus' sweaty cheek, "I'm going to move you, alright?" He watched Rodimus' optics flicker on a bit brighter and his dry lips part to say something but nothing came out. Instead he just let his optics dim again. "Okay."

With a bit of effort and a few small whines of pain from Rodimus, Magnus had turned the hot rod in his arms. Setting Rodimus so his back was against his chest, Magnus slid Rodimus' legs down the tub to between his own. From there Magnus slid Rodimus downward a bit so he was slightly as if sitting on a cozy chair. At least as cozy as Magnus could make it, considering Rodimus' damaged spoiler was making it a bit difficult.

"There we go." Magnus cooed as he reached over the edge of the tub and searched around for the towels he had set down. Grabbing a little washcloth, he brought it up and dipped it into the water. "Just relax, I know it hurts." Squeezing out the cloth, Magnus brought the soft fabric down on Rodimus damp cheek.

Wiping some of the soot off, Magnus continued to clean spots here and there all over Rodimus' face and chest. He was delicate around his exposed neck cables and nothing but affectionate when running over scrapes on Rodimus' chest plate. In truth Rodimus needed a full scrub down, his frame a disaster after whatever it was that made his frame ignite the way it did. A simple washcloth wasn't doing much good, but it did seem to soothe Rodimus.

At least until Magnus moved downward and ran the cloth over his infected weld. He dabbed at it, avoiding the center as much as possible, but Rodimus whimper let him know it even the softness of the cloth was excruciating.

"ZZk-" Rodimus' legs shifted under the water and he tried to shift his abdomen away from the touch, but being leaned back against Magnus left him with nowhere to go. "Zzzsk!" He has to tolerate it, and he does, his shoulders dropping when finally the cloth vanishes from the stinging metal.

Wringing out the cloth and placing it back on the floor beside the other towels, Magnus sat himself back against the tub. With one massive arm he snaked it around Rodimus' waist and pulled him snugly against him.

"Roddy," Magnus whispered as he nuzzled the top of the hot rods head, "Are you ready?" He wasn't even sure *he* was ready let alone Rodimus.

Chest suddenly rising and falling a bit faster, Rodimus' breath picked up. At first he doesn't move, he doesn't want to. Behind his damaged chest plate, his spark pounds so hard he is *sure* Magnus can feel it.

I'm... I don't...

Magnus nuzzles him again, hugging him close. He doesn't rush him; instead he waits, as patiently as ever.

Mags... I-

Under the water's surface, Rodimus' little hand reached up to where Magnus' more massive palm is pressed against him. Grabbing one of his fingers and squeezing it, Rodimus swallows hard.

The water at the end of the tub ripples slightly as Rodimus' knees emerge and part to press against the sides of the tub. He can't get them up far but it's enough that below his interfacing array is exposed, leaving him vulnerable once more.

Face scrunched up, Rodimus felt coolant burning his optics and he squeezed them shut, not wanting them to spill over. Instead he just bared his denta and waited, but nothing happened.

He had been used to greedy hands for so long he had expected Magnus to dive right in, but instead, he felt nothing but his comforting nuzzled at the top of his head. He had extended the finger Rodimus had currently been squeezing to allow him to squeeze it even more. He was patient and waited for Rodimus to get his bearings before making any sort of move.

"You're alright." Magnus repeated over and over until Rodimus panting settled, but his body remained tense. Magnus didn't doubt he could get him to relax any further than what he already was. He would just have to proceed and hope for the best.

With his free hand, Magnus stroked up and down along the side of Rodimus' body. Since his fingers were far too large to dig into his seams and massage the no doubt aching cables, he just used his knuckles to massage into the seams instead. He had been sure it felt nice due to Rodimus soft sighs of pleasure, but the lower he got, the stiffer Rodimus' body became. Practically a board when he moved his hand down to Rodimus' panel, Magnus felt the little mech holding his breath.

"Breathe." He listened to Rodimus huff out the held breath and take in another big one. "Breathe." Again, he hears him huff it out, but at least he wasn't holding it anymore. "Good."

Sliding his hand further down, Magnus pressed two large fingers against the Rodimus' groin. At least a few inches above the hatch that would have released his spike, Magnus rubbed soothing circles into the metal.

"Zzsk-" Rodimus shifted, his hand squeezing Magnus' finger tightening. Below, his legs shifted, wanting to lower them and close them more than anything. "Mnzk-" He resists the urge and instead listens to Magnus when he hears the low volume of his voice.

"I'm going to touch your panel now, okay?" Sliding his fingers downward, just barely touching the metal, Magnus cupped the array.

Pressing back against Magnus, Rodimus pulled his hips up and away, but Magnus' hand followed. It didn't squeeze him painfully, or even at all, instead Magnus just lightly cupped him, trying to get him used to the feeling.

"Easy, easy, you're fine." Magnus cooed, trying to settle him. At no point had he expected this to be easy for Rodimus, but he was taking it a lot better than he had hoped. Sure he was a panting and fidgeting mess, but he was trying his best to be compliant. "You're fine." He didn't protest when he felt Magnus rub back and forth, his palm like a ghost over the array.

He'd been so used to fingers prying at him, tearing his panel open if he hadn't opened it fast enough or at all. He'd gotten too used to expecting the sting of a harsh penetration that he was naturally stiff, always waiting for the impact, but it never came.

Magnus' hand was nothing but kind, never taking, always asking. When the tips of his

fingers grazed over the seams leading to his valve, they never dug in, instead traced over in a soothing manner. It was strange how nice it felt, or maybe it had been due to the medical grade finally dampening his senses, but Rodimus felt his panel tingle in a way he couldn't remember.

The sensation was faint, but it felt *nice*. Warm, comforting, and as Magnus continued to circle around, Rodimus felt his groin swell. What a strange... strange sensation. Without the help of whatever the Master's drug was to induce him into a temporary heat, this feeling was... genuine.

"Mhm~" He arched lightly against Magnus, his knees sagging apart a bit further. The once tense expression on his face softened to something more dazed and clouded. The grip he had on Magnus' single finger relaxed, and for the first time, Rodimus seemed to enjoy a bit of contact.

"That's it." Pleased Rodimus seemed to be taking things well, Magnus pushed on. "Roddy," Keeping up the slow circular movement, Magnus continued, "when you're ready, open your panel."

"Zzzk-" The peaceful look on Rodimus' face vanished and he squirmed in place. "kkkzzk-" He shook his head, squeezing his optics shut once more.

"Relax, Roddy... just go easy." The building panic was clear, and Magnus did his best to comfort him back down. "It's alright right, take your time."

By this point, Rodimus was well aware Magnus had meant well with everything he had done, but even know, he was struggling.

He tried to get his panel to open but his HUD refused, keeping the panel sealed shut as tight as possible. So tight in fact, it ached. No matter how many times he sent the command for it to open, it wouldn't budge.

I... I can't...

Panic sank in at the realization he couldn't get it open, and despite knowing Magnus wasn't going to tear him open for disobeying, he couldn't shake the feeling. His massive fingers were all too familiar when it came to the Crimson mech, and each touch had fire licking up the back of his spine in panic.

He jerked in the water and felt Magnus' grip around his waist tighten, keeping him secure in place.

"Roddy," Magnus kept his voice as calm as possible, "Listen to me-" He wasn't listening, and instead kept wiggling, both of his hands shooting up out of the water to grasp desperately at the edges of the tub. "Roddy, listen to me," He didn't want to squeeze the little mech too tight, but his squirming would no doubt self inflict damage if he didn't calm down; "Listen to me."

Thankfully, Rodimus frail condition left him easily drained after the sudden exertion. He sagged back against Magnus, panting harshly.

"I know you're scared," Magnus began, reaching his free hand out of the water to gently pry one of Rodimus' hands off the edge of the tub, "I know this isn't easy, but you have to let me help you." Taking Rodimus' little hand into his own and rubbing his thumb over the top of it, Magnus continued. "I'm right here." Little fingers gripped Magnus' hand, squeezing. "Let me help you." Having stopped rubbing Rodimus' panel during the struggle, Magnus started once more. Pressing nothing but the tips of his fingers into the panel, he rubbed slow circles all around.

Swallowing hard and doing his best to focus on nothing but Magnus' voice, Rodimus tried once more to get his panel hatch to open.

Again, he was met with the panel aching instead of opening, but when he scrunched his face and willed it to do as he asked, finally it parted. At first not all the way, instead it slid back an inch, threatened to close, but finally started to open.

A dark gray cloud of what Magnus could only assume was infected energon sudden stained the green water. Having no doubt built up over time due to the infected seal, it had probably been one of the main reasons for Rodimus' cramping. At no point had he ever made Rodimus open his panel, knowing it wouldn't be good for him and at the time, he had no intention of ever using Rodimus for interfacing.

At the time Rodimus hadn't seemed to suffer anything but the obvious abuse as a pleasure slave. Having thought at the time his body had naturally healed what had been inflicted; Magnus had never thought to be invasive when it came to checking his array. Looking back on it, he wished he had, even if it put a kink in their trust, at least it might have lead them down a better road than the one they were currently on.

"Good, that's it, good." The praising did little, as Rodimus rattled against his frame, utterly exhausted and afraid. It was apparent by how hard he was squeezing Magnus' hand and how hard he was focusing on keeping the panel open. "Everything is going to be fine, just a little more and it's over."

The medical grade mixed into the water stung at his open array, making Rodimus toss his head back and emit a frantic amount of static. He kicked and the water splashed outside of the tub, but Magnus allowed it. Above he had done his best to coo and sooth Rodimus until the medical grade finally started to tingle. The sting became a light throb and in a matter of minutes, Rodimus settled once more.

With the hand he had used to hold Rodimus in place, Magnus snaked it down back towards the open array. The side of his hand grazed something that hadn't been there before, and right away he knew it was Rodimus' spike.

It had probably been too much work for Rodimus to focus on opening only one panel and instead just allowed his whole array out. Regardless, Magnus ignored the limp spike and instead continued his descent.

Hovering just above the exposed valve, Magnus tilted his head down and nuzzled the top of Rodimus' head. Bringing his hand down to cup the battered and bruised valve folds, Magnus feels Rodimus jerk against him.

Hips jerking away from the contact, Rodimus' vocalize clicked in protest. He squirmed, but settled when Magnus hushed him.

"I'm sorry, I know it hurts." Without putting too much pressure on the soft mesh, Magnus rubbed up and down. AT some point he knew it felt nice when Rodimus sank back into him and let out a soft sigh. "That's it." With two fingers, Magnus spread Rodimus' valve folds apart, attempting to get the medical grade to soak further into him before he moved into the important part- the *final* part.

There is no way the medical grade will soften the blow. It's hard for Magnus to even accept it will lessen the pain to come at all, but as long as it tended to the smaller wounds, it would have to do.

“Nhm~” Again, that weird sensation was back, twisting at his groin and making his cheeks heat. Perhaps Magnus had noticed because his hand would longer and rub at his outer node.

The sensation was wild, a bit too wild as Rodimus’ hips bucked slightly away as the stimulation. When has anybody ever paid any attention to his node? When could he ever remember when a client tried to make *him* feel good? Usually never, and he had never even experienced a hint of enjoyment, but with Magnus it was oddly different.

It felt *good* .

“Roddy?” Magnus noticed the sudden expression change and the groggy look of fogged desire. “Are you alright?” He kept rubbing clockwise, with barely any pressure of speed.

He was both surprised and pleased to get a small nod from Rodimus.

“Good.” Rubbing his thumb over the top of Rodimus now slack hand, Magnus noticed something he should have before.

His fingers were at least three maybe four times the size of Rodimus’. So easily did his little hand fit in his massive palm and only then did he realize the actual size difference.

When it came to tearing the seal, Magnus had never actually intended to interface with Rodimus to get it taken care of. The last thing he wanted was to force Rodimus down and into his berth when an unknown majority of his life had already been made up of that. What he wanted was to make the experience as good as possible, even in the awful circumstances. Or in the very least, as painless as possible, but the two of them were aware this wasn’t going to be *painless* .

He had settled for using his fingers, but only now realized perhaps that hadn’t been the best idea either. His fingers no doubt matched the size of a regular mech’s spike, in girth and length. Despite thinking a single finger would do the job with little pain, it was clear it wasn’t completely true.

Cursing himself for not having noticed or even thought of it sooner, Magnus pulled Rodimus into a gentle hug. It was too late to turn back now and get better items to accommodate the situation, he had to push on. He would have to take his time and be careful, and hopefully have Rodimus trust.

It had to end tonight. Rodimus had suffered enough and he wouldn’t allow it to go any further.

Outer node now swollen, Magnus pressed into the plump bead. Pleased with the soft groans escaping past Rodimus’ dry lips, Magnus pressed on.

Sliding his middle finger down between engorged valve folds, he prodded lightly at Rodimus’ valve ring. Right away Rodimus reacted by jerking his hips back, not sure about the contact. When his breathing picked up and he started to panic again, Magnus was quick to soothe.

“Shh, relax.” He slid his finger up, and then back down again. Every few minutes he returned to Rodimus’ outer node to get him warmed up again. When he thinks Rodimus is ready, he slides his finger back down and prods a little harder.

Rodimus’ valve ring flutters, clenching down hard before Magnus has a chance to breach. It doesn’t stay clamped for long, as it flutters back open when nudged. Pressing forward, Magnus pushes the tip of his finger inside, and instantly feels Rodimus clamp down on him.

“Sszk!” Squeezing Magnus’ hand, Rodimus shakes his head. He kicks and the water

splashes outside of the tub again as panic starts to swell behind his chest.

“Roddy-” Squeezing the hot rods hand, Magnus doesn’t remove his finger from Rodimus’ valve, and instead he kept pushing forward, trying desperately for Rodimus to adjust, “look at me.” He stopped when his finger reached his middle knuckle, and right away he could tell the valve seal was close. The valve walls around him clenched and bit down rapidly, the inner mesh stiff from the seal being poorly sewed to the mesh. Perhaps only an inch higher and Magnus would have hit it.

Shaking his head, Rodimus arches back against him, his mouth opening and his scare scrunching as if he wanted to yell. It hurt, just the initial penetration hurt and burned but that wasn’t what was making Rodimus fight. It was the knowledge of the pain to come with the seal tar that had him fighting. It would be excruciating and even worse now that it was infected.

Mags... please! Let me go! Please Mag- I...

The water around Magnus began to boil and steam wafted from the seams on Rodimus’ body above the water. The hot sensation against Magnus back suddenly increased to the point he felt his chest burning.

Let me go! I’ll live with it! Let me go!

Despite his optics being squeezed shut, coolant flooded out and over his face. Again and again he opened his mouth to yell, but nothing but erratic static burst out.

“Rodimus,” Magnus pulled him close, close enough that his struggles were impeded by the tight grip, “Rodimus **look** at me.” At first Rodimus ignores him, or maybe he doesn’t hear him right away. Instead he keep struggling, arching hard and wiggling his hips away from Magnus’ hand that only follows. “ **Rodimus** .” He didn’t raise his voice, but the *thoom* of it had Rodimus’ optics snapping open.

As he looked up at Magnus, he blinked, struggling to focus.

“That’s it, good, just look at me.” Sliding his finger out, he watched Rodimus’ lower lip wiggle. As he slid it back in, Rodimus’ optics fogged over. The steam continued to waft from his body, but the water cooled. “Just keep looking at me.” In and out his finger worked and carefully he reached his thumb up to rub at his outer node to help the sensation. “That’s it, good.” Pushing his finger up a little more, he touched the seal, flexing it.

The water splashed as Rodimus jerked, his optics squeezing shut again as he bared his denta in mercy at Magnus. The noise he makes is caught between a desperate beg to get it over with and a plea to just let him go. His little fingers clawed into Magnus’ hand harder than ever, threatening to break apart his own armor.

Pulling his finger back, Magnus hesitates, knowing the next push would have to be rough but it would be one to end it all.

“Rodimus, look at me.” Watching Rodimus struggle to get his optics online, Magnus nuzzled the top of his head and kissed at the golden chevron. “Just keep looking at me. Focus on me.” With optics half lit and flickering, Rodimus nodded, fresh tears rolling down his cheeks in thick globs. He was hyperventilating, his vents flapping open and closed so hard the water around them rippled. He was scared, cornered, and ready for it to end.

Optics wide and terrified, they focused and narrowed on Magnus, and then it happened-

Jerking his hand and pushing his finger up as far and as fast as he could manage, Magnus punched through the seal. Tearing into the mesh and butting past, he winced at Rodimus' reaction.

Optics snapping open wider than ever, Rodimus' frame arched so hard he was afraid he would snap his own spinal strut. His mouth flew open farther than he had ever seen to scream but again, nothing came out but a bunch of jumbled static and beeps.

The pain sent sparks flashing in his vision field and his legs rattled so hard the water around them rippled and spilled out over the tubs edge.

His frame stiffened so hard he became like a statue in Magnus' grip, his breath before finally he started to gasp. Almost as if he was suffocating, his gasps were wet and frantic. His frozen limbs suddenly jumped to life and he flailed, his hand clawing at the air for anything to get him away.

Below, a *black* cloud of energon burst past Magnus' intruding finger, tainting the water completely. As if sitting in a tub of sludge, the water continued to darken as every bit of infected energon built up behind the seal was finally released.

"Breathe, Rodimus," Magnus rocked back and forth, keeping the still arched and stiff hot rod pressed firmly against him. "Breathe, it's over, it's over." Withdrawing his finger and spreading Rodimus' valve folds apart again to try and allow more of the infected energon out, Magnus felt Rodimus suddenly fall limp against him.

Face pale and without an expression, Rodimus' optics were dark. His frame still steamed, but in a matter of seconds it finally subsided. If not for his hiccupped breathing, Magnus may have panicked, but instead accepted Rodimus having passed out. In truth, he was glad he had.

"It's over, it's finally over." Finally, with the seal torn Rodimus body could finally focus on repairing with the strain. In a matter of days the seal would completely dissolve, and in a week, Rodimus would perk up now that he had a food source and proper care. It was Rodimus mental state that would need time to really heal, and Magnus was willing to give him all the time it would take.

Draining the tub of the soiled water, Magnus refilled it about halfway with clean water. Reaching over the tubs edge and getting the other medical grade cubes he had left out earlier, he cracked them open into the water. As he had thought before, he wasn't enough to turn the water completely green, but at least it was clean water.

Reaching down and spreading Rodimus' valve apart one more time, Magnus let the fresh medical grade do its work. Letting it flood the inner channel of Rodimus' valve, hopefully it would help the healing process and dull the pain. No doubt Rodimus would be sore in the morning.

Lifting Rodimus off himself a bit and rotating him to once again be positioned bridal style, Magnus let Rodimus' head rest against his shoulder. Rocking him back and forth, he just sat there and soaked for a while.

"I'm sorry Roddy." Magnus whispered, reaching up with one hand to brush some of the still present tears off the resting mech's face. "I'm sorry." Grabbing the washcloth once more from the floor, Magnus dipped it into the water and began to clean Rodimus once again. This time he focused on his face, dabbing at his red cheeks and the soot around his chin.

Taking one of his little hands, Magnus cleaned off his fingers, then his wrists and his elbows. He was delicate, kind, and thoughtful with each little swipe, apologizing every few

seconds.

Tossing the cloth over the edge of the tub when there was nothing more to wipe down, Magnus sighed and sank back. Taking one of Rodimus' hands into his own, he looked at it, and then noticed four little dents imbedded into his own hand. He had managed to squeeze him so tight he damaged the top layer of his armor.

"I'm sorry." Leaning down and pressing his lips to the bridge of Rodimus' nose, Magnus kissed tenderly. He didn't pull away and instead kept his lips there a while longer before deciding it was finally time to get out.

Draining the tub for the last time, Magnus finally caught a clear glimpse at Rodimus interface array. Before it had been hampered by the water, but now, it was in plain sight.

Rodimus' spike matched his sad paintjob, red and gold like the rest of him, but that isn't what caught Magnus' sights. No, it was the very clear and very visible finger marches imbedded into the plating. As if someone had grabbed him so tight they damaged his spike.

Reaching down, Magnus put his fingers near Rodimus' spike, a soft *tsk* escaping him when it was clear whoever had grabbed him there had hands as *large* as his. It made sense why Rodimus had always been so weary of him. He was *large* and all this time someone *large* had been causing him pain.

Shaking his head in disgust, Magnus carefully pushed Rodimus' spike back into its housing. Not quite putting Rodimus' valve away, Magnus instead took the last medical grade cube he had and dumped it over Rodimus' open valve. Massaging it into the now visible bruised lips, he then closed the hatch. Hopefully the medical grade would soak in overnight.

Finally, standing up and stepping out of the tub, Magnus paused when he noticed Rodimus spoiler flap freely. Limp like the rest of his limbs, it had only been relevant when Magnus saw the dent.

Without hesitation, Magnus reached out and touched the dent. Using his thumb he pushed the squashed metal upwards, doing his best to sculpt it back into place. Smoothing out the finger marks the best he could, he got it to look as normal as possible. Sure, it wasn't perfect and wouldn't be until they finally went for a frame refitting, but at least this way it wouldn't hurt as much or look as bad. There was no way Rodimus would have let him touch it while he was conscious, so why not kill two birds with one stone.

Picking up one of the towels he had set down, Magnus wrapped Rodimus in it and to the best of his ability dried him and himself off. Tossing the towel down on the floor with the cracked medical grade cubes and other towels, Magnus leaves the room. He would worry about the mess in the morning. As of right now, his attention was devoted to Rodimus.

Walking to his bedroom, Magnus pushed open the door with his shoulder and went inside. Heading right for the bed, he pulled the cover back and laid Rodimus down on his side. Limbs a mess, Magnus tucked his arms by his chest and fixed his legs so they were straight. Once complete, he stepped back and looked the hot rod over.

Already color had started to return to Rodimus pale face, giving his cheeks a soft pink color. Below, his weld had also started to show some color, no longer as dark a gray it had been an hour ago. Good, it had worked, and already his body was healing.

Reaching out and stroking Rodimus' head, Magnus sighed and allowed his shoulders to sag.

What a night.

Exhausted, Magnus found himself climbing into bed next to Rodimus. Pulling the little mech close to his chest, he rested his chin on the top of Rodimus' head. Taking in a deep breath, he sighed.

Rodimus, still out cold, breathed softly against Magnus' chest. There it was warm, safe, and comforting, and subconsciously, he melted into it.

Chapter 9

He had woken about an hour before the sun but made no attempt to rise from his bed. Instead he lay there, staring at Rodimus' small face, still tucked against his frame. He had spent a good hour just staring, taking in every little feature Rodimus' face.

Cheeks a faint blush color, they no longer glowed with the heat of a fever. His breathing had steadied as well, once harsh huffs through the night had turned into little inhales and exhales of hot air along Magnus' chest. For the majority of the night neither of them had shifted in their slumber, Rodimus on occasion fidgeting but settling right away when Magnus pulled him close. It took only a moment for him to settle, for once, he seemed at peace where he was.

Sliding a massive hand out from under the covers, Magnus let his palm come gently down against Rodimus' cheek. It was cool against his palm, and he smiled, silently happy his fever had dropped to an acceptable temperature. With proper care and a little time he would probably make a full recovery in days at this rate.

Sliding his thumb under Rodimus' optic, Magnus stroked back and forth for awhile, continuing to absorb Rodimus' presence until the little mech shifted. Pressing his cheek harder into Magnus' hand and licking his dry lips, Rodimus settled into the pillow once more.

Leaning down and pressing gentle lips against the smaller mech's forehead, Magnus kissed lightly. Instead of pulling away, he kept his lips in place for a few minutes and dimmed his optics until they were nearly offline.

Internally his spark flip-flopped, fluttering against his thick chestplate in ways he never thought it could. Had he ever been intimate with anybody? No, at least not like this. He had never shared a bed with anybody, platonically or romantically, all he had ever known was work. Whatever hints had been dropped at him by mechs prior he had never picked up on- flirting had never been his strong point. He never had a use for it or a partner, he had his work, and at the time that was all that mattered. Until now.

He hadn't realized at first his growing affection towards Rodimus until It was far too late. He was invested, he cared, and he wasn't sure if it what was to come of it. This had all just been a side job to keep him busy, something that shouldn't have lasted as long as it had, and yet, here he was. He had convinced himself that taking Rodimus to the council right away would have hailed little results. He couldn't speak, and he was terrified at the time. At least under Magnus care he had opened up, but what would happen when he finally handed Rodimus off to testify against the slave trade. Where would he go after that? Rodimus would have to choose.

Spark suddenly aching, Magnus nuzzled his lips a little harder against Rodimus' forehead, trying to banish the thoughts. Thoughts he would have to deal with later.

A soft grumble sounded from below the sheets and Magnus pulled his lips away from Rodimus' forehead. He sighed, his tank rumbling again as it insisted fuel be added to it as soon as possible.

With his attention focused on Rodimus and only Rodimus the night before, Magnus had let his own personal needs slip his mind. Having fallen asleep on an empty tank, it ached bitterly for him to consume something and soon.

Giving Rodimus' forehead one last little kiss before sliding himself off the edge of the bed,

Magnus stood and stretched. His armor groaned but settled back into place when he turned back to face the bed, Rodimus still sound asleep.

Reaching down and taking the blankets in hand, Magnus pulled it up and over Rodimus' shoulder. Tucking him in and giving his golden chevron a loving stroke, Magnus turned towards the door. Heading out into the hall, Magnus made sure to close the door nearly all the way before heading towards the kitchen.

As he walked he yawned, recharge still weighing heavy on his shoulders. His optics still felt heavy and he rubbed one while extracting an energon cube from the fridge. Next he moved to the counter where his kettle and mug waited patiently.

Pouring the cube into the kettle and turning it on, Magnus turned his attention to the cabinet above. Pulling the doors open, he pulled out a narrow box and set it down by his mug. Next he pulled out a few napkins, setting those down by the narrow box as well.

Taking the box in hand and flipping the flaps open, a few biscuits slid out onto his palm. He set three down on the napkin, making sure they were stacked perfectly before shaking the box to retrieve more.

Hm...

Four more biscuits and a decent amount of crumbs tumbled from the box. Not only did the odd number irritate him but the fact he was running low on food as well. In all the commotion he hadn't really thought about restocking his supplies. On his own they would last for months, but with Rodimus as an addition, he burned through things significantly faster.

I'll have to make a run to the market.

Setting three biscuits down on a second napkin, Magnus held the fourth odd one out for a moment.

Maybe I could pick up a few treats for Rodimus.

Setting the fourth biscuit down on one napkin, Magnus remembered that sweet smile and jump for joy the day he had bought Rodimus energon sweets. The way his spoiler flapped and the way his optics lit up at such a small gift. He deserved them.

The kettle's whistling pulled him from his thoughts and he picked it up, pouring the vividly pink fluid into his usual mug. As he topped himself off, a soft *ping* popped up on his internal HUD.

Wheeljack.

"Wheeljack?" Magnus' voice was a bit grittier than he wanted it to be as he picked up the com line.

"Mags!" Wheeljack's voice was as boisterous as ever, causing Magnus to lean slightly to the side as his internal audio rang. "I'm sorry I didn't pick up my com last night, I had to run out of town for a bit. More specifically I was looking for a vocalizer to match Rodimus' frame coding. I hadn't gotten your message until I got back this morning."

"And what do you make of it?" Setting the kettle down and lifting his mug to his lips, Magnus blew on the boiling energon.

"You mean what do I think of him spontaneously combusting in the middle of your

apartment?”

“Yes, and I have more. I... last night... I” Lowering his mug, Magnus felt a knot form in his intake. He hadn’t realized this was going to be as difficult to say as it was. It was intimate, at least to *some* degree. “I punctured the seal last night.” There was a moment of silence that seemed to last an eternity before Wheeljack hummed in the background. “Rodimus was so weak after he had... caught fire. Weak to the point he was turning *gray*. I was afraid if I... if I didn’t do anything he would have died.”

“So how is he doing now?”

“He’s...” A small smile of relief crept along Magnus’ face, “he’s doing better. He’s still weak. After I tore the seal he just... went slack, but he didn’t offline. I was... afraid I was going to kill him. I thought the added strain on his body would finally overwhelm him but... he’s doing better. Already his fever has dropped significantly and his color is coming back. In all honesty he’s healing much faster than I thought he would.”

“He’s young, doesn’t surprise me, plus I don’t doubt you pumped him with medical grade?”

“To some degree.” He would certainly be mixing medical grade into everything Rodimus ate for the rest of the week, *if* he could get Rodimus to eat. “I haven’t checked the weld on his midsection yet today, but I’m sure it’s healing. He’s sleeping and I don’t want to wake him yet.” There was another long pause before Magnus licked his lips and spoke in a softer tone, a *worried* tone. “I’m afraid of what he will think of me when he wakes up.”

“What do you mean?” Wheeljack questioned.

“Nothing about last night was easy for him, he was terrified, and I hurt him.” It was a necessary evil but would Rodimus see it that way? What was going to happen if he reverted to what he was like when Magnus first found him? What if he refused to eat, sleep, or even move from the corner again? What if Rodimus was *afraid* of him? It made his spark ache harder than he ever thought imaginable at that thought.

“Listen Mags, I really don’t know what to say about that but I think he’ll be alright. Like I said before, there is nobody better to take care of him than you. If it helps I can try to get a word to *Rung* for advice but all I can offer right now is incite on what happened last night.”

“I’m listening.” Magnus sighed as he took another small sip of his energon.

“I think Rodimus has a special ability, an outlier ability to be more exact. Much like you are a *load bearer* Rodimus has his own little tricks.” Wheeljack cleared his intake and continued on. “It’s not uncommon for frame to experience extreme fatigue after activating something like that and burn out. It’s actually amazing he didn’t burn himself out of existence in his current state. With proper training he could learn to control it to an extent, but it’s best not to irritate it into doing so for now.” There was a soft tapping sound and Magnus wondered if Wheeljack was rubbing his chin. “What exactly *did* cause this, do you know?”

“I think he was having a nightmare. I was in the other room and could hear him... whimpering. When I entered he was as I said in my message, steaming, scalding hot, and then on fire all at once. I had touched him though, tried to get him awake, he didn’t ignite until I had touched him.”

“Hmm, interesting.”

“It lasted for maybe ten seconds, but the flames intensity wasn’t enough to do any real damage other than singe a few wires.” If Rodimus did train his ability, there was no doubt it could easily be lethal.

“Well, it’s best if you try to keep him from using it again, at least for now. When he is in better condition and in a controlled space it will be better for him... and your furniture.” The small chuckle went unappreciated. “Well, some good news is that Rodimus should have a new vocalizer in a few days. I managed to find one a few towns over that matched his body signature. It’s going to take me some time to calibrate it but when it’s ready I will call. The installation shouldn’t take more than an hour and he should be good as new from there.”

“Thank you Wheeljack, for everything. I’m not sure I could have handled this on my own.”

“Nonsense, you don’t give yourself enough credit Mags. Take care of yourself.” The com line clicked and just like that, Wheeljack was gone.

Taking a deep breath and letting out a steady sigh, Magnus watched the steam waft from the mug and evaporate into the air. Allowing his shoulders to sag, he brought the mug up to his lips and took a long swig, hoping from here on out it would be smooth sailing. If Wheeljack worked quickly Rodimus might have a vocalizer and from there, a normal life. That was the least he could hope for.

A loud thump startled Magnus, causing him to jerk his hand and spill some energon onto the floor. Softly cursing as he grabbed a few of the napkins from the counter and bent down to clean up the mess, he heard the *thump* again.

Standing and setting his mug on the counter, Magnus moved outside of the kitchen and into the living room to spot Rodimus on his hands and knees.

“Roddy?!” Rodimus had one hand on the door frame, struggling to pull himself up onto his feet and failing miserably at doing so. From what Magnus could see he was panting, his back rising and falling as he struggled with himself to move towards Magnus’ direction.

Rushing across the living room and kneeling down by Rodimus’ front, Magnus reached out to touch him. His hands came to a harsh halt just before Rodimus’ shoulder. Should he touch him?

As the thoughts tumble through Magnus’ mind, he feels himself drawn from his thoughts when a small hand weakly slides into his massive palm. Squeezing ever so gently and tugging lightly, Rodimus looked up, his optics hazy.

“Roddy-” Magnus starts to say as Rodimus pulls himself in, tucking himself against Magnus’ chest and resting his chin on top of his shoulder. Snuggling against Magnus like he had in bed, Rodimus settled, his spoiler sagging behind him. A hot puff of air escaped his vents as he sighed, content with where he was.

At first Magnus didn’t move, not really sure what to do. He hadn’t expected this in the slightest, if anything he expected at least some form of a cold shoulder. Not that he was complaining, this silent need for attention and affection was quickly granted.

Slowly wrapping his arms around Rodimus’ frame, Magnus rubbed between his shoulder blades. The tips of his finger ghosted over the area his spoiler met his back, and he felt Rodimus shift further into him when he rubbed the base. It must have felt good.

“You shouldn’t be walking so soon. You’re still recovering.” There was a soft noise of protest

from Rodimus, small but loud enough for Magnus to know he was groaning at him. It was half hearted and he made no other noise when Magnus lifted him up into his arms with ease. “Are you hungry?” Before Rodimus could answer him, Magnus was walking towards the charred sofa. More than anything he wanted to get Rodimus to eat something. It was likely that his own reserves were running low, all the more reason to get him to eat as soon as possible.

“Rest here for a moment; I’ll get you something to eat.” Setting Rodimus down on the part of the sofa he hadn’t incinerated, Magnus turned towards the kitchen.

As he poured two glasses of warm energon for Rodimus, Magnus made a mental note on his HUD to order a new sofa. Leaving the charred one out for the night had already caused his apartment to reek of burnt plastic and fabric.

Setting the glasses on a small tray and then placing the biscuits down next, Magnus picked it up and hurried back to the living room. Relieved to see Rodimus had done as he had been told and remained where Magnus had left him, he looked up with glossy optics at the energon glasses.

Unconsciously, he licked his lips which were dry and cracked before watching Magnus sit himself down by Rodimus’ side.

The sofa groaned under his weight, and for a moment Magnus wondered if the internal supports had been damaged. He would find out if he went through it, but for now he focused on getting energon into Rodimus.

“Here, nice and warm.” Picking up a glass and holding it out to the smaller mech, Magnus watched as his little hands reached for it. They trembled slightly and his grip was weak on the glass, but he clasps it with two hands. Slowly Rodimus brought it to his lips, and slowly he tilted it back taking long thick gulps. “Easy Roddy, easy. Magnus cooed, lightly pulling at the bottom of the glass to get Rodimus to slow down, and he did.

Lowering the glass when it was empty, Rodimus eyed the second and Magnus exchanged the full glass for the empty one. Happy to see Rodimus suck down a second glass, he felt a weight come off his shoulders.

Good, Rodimus was eating *and* didn’t seem to fear him in any regard. He looked visually better as well. Much like the night before his color had returned and in the morning he was even more vibrant. Or at least as vibrant as his mucked up frame could get. The only thing that had worried Magnus was the strange vacant look in Rodimus’ optics. He didn’t seem all there and when he looked up at Magnus to hand over the second glass he seemed to look through him.

He had assumed Rodimus was still utterly exhausted. His body was stressed to the max and needed time recharge and revitalize. He *looked* exhausted, his shoulders were sagged, and his optics remained half lit despite the addition of fuel to his tank.

Despite the weld on Rodimus’ midsection still harboring a gross color, the metal had seemed to warp back into place and improve slightly. It was all Magnus could hope for at this point.

“Roddy,” Picking up the napkin of four biscuits, Magnus handed it over to Rodimus, “when you are feeling better how about we go for that paint job?” As he spoke, Rodimus picked up one biscuit and put it in his mouth. Nibbling on it with little effort, his optics focused glossed over as he listened. “In a few days we can go, when you get your bearings back, and by then I think Wheeljack will have your vocalizer ready for you as well.”

As Magnus spoke, Rodimus’ frame started to tilt towards Magnus. Lower and lower he allowed

himself to lean until his head came to rest against one of Magnus' massive thighs.

"What do you think about tha-" Magnus froze, his hands hovering slightly above Rodimus' shoulder. "Uh-" He lowered his hands, letting one come to rest on the side of Rodimus' head. Gently he pet back and forth while Rodimus nibbled on a second biscuit. Still he seemed so vacant.

Optics dimming, Rodimus nuzzled his cheek harder into Magnus' thigh and sighed. It took only a few strokes to his chevron for his optics to blink offline and his frame to relax into slumber.

"Hm." Tracing over a few seams along Rodimus' head, Magnus smiled. Things were going to be okay. He was gentle as he stroked, running the sides of his fingers over Rodimus' cheek, then his neck, and down the side of his shoulder. Nothing but affection, no harm, just comfort, and it lulled Rodimus into a deeper sleep.

Reaching over his shoulder and pulling a slightly charred blanket off the top of the sofa, Magnus flapped it apart and draped it over Rodimus' frame.

Via his HUD, Magnus turned on the TV across the room and lowered the volume until it was barely audible. He wasn't getting up anytime soon, nor was he interested in doing so.

As the local weather was broadcast from the TV, Magnus continued to pet Rodimus.

It had taken a total of three days before Rodimus started to show signs of increased energy. Having spent the majority of the time either recharging or sucking down energon, he very rarely moved. By the third day he had gotten up on his own and against Magnus' wishes, moved about the apartment. He easily tired after a few steps, awkwardly coming to a halt where ever he was standing to catch his breath before continuing on his way.

Magnus had attributed his mass fatigue to his body having reverted to low power mode in an attempt to quicken the healing process, and it did. By the third morning he seemed to be able to move without having to take a break despite being a bit stiff.

By then Magnus had replaced his sofa, and Rodimus often made himself comfortable on it, napping on it as often as he could. As much as Magnus would have preferred Rodimus sleep in bed, he couldn't complain. Rodimus was resting and ate anything Magnus offered with without hesitation, and that was good enough for him.

Around the second day after the seal break, Rodimus weld along his midsection had faded nearly out of sight, leaving only the ugly weld behind. Soon that wouldn't be a problem, as the upcoming paint job would also replace a few of armor pieces Rodimus had clearly outgrown. With his body refitted and pampered, he would probably feel like a new mech all together when it was done and over with.

On the third day, Rodimus had finally seemed to revert to his old self. He perked up when Magnus spoke to him, his optics no longer clouded with that strange haze. Sure he still couldn't speak back to him, but his little smiles and spoiler flaps told Magnus all he needed to know.

What had pleased Magnus, though, was how often he caught Rodimus heating and drinking his own energon. There had been little to no hesitation each time he poured energon into the kettle and waited for it to warm. At first Magnus had assumed the two glasses on the counter had been

for Rodimus, but when the hot rod came into the living room and extended one to him, he had been pleasantly surprised. After that it had become a small morning ritual to heat energon for each other.

There had been one other thing that had caught Magnus off guard, and that was finding Rodimus asleep tucked against his back every morning. It wouldn't have been odd if Magnus hadn't said goodnight to Rodimus every night in opposite rooms. Magnus had been under the impression each night that Rodimus had finally started to sleep in his own bed, but every morning Rodimus was right up against him despite going to bed alone.

At what time of night Rodimus decides to sneak in and climb into bed with him, he can never figure out, but in truth it doesn't matter. Would he have stopped Rodimus if he caught him? No, so he never tried.

Only on nights when he heard Rodimus whimper and felt him shift against him did Magnus roll over to face him.

In the low light Magnus would study Rodimus' face, taking in that scrunched up look and trying to make out what he was dreaming about to make him so upset. Some nights the dreams seemed worse than others, some causing Rodimus' body to boil. His fidgeting would worsen and only then would Magnus roll over and embrace him. Most nights he tried to keep to himself, never touching Rodimus to make sure he had personal space, but these nights were different. He needed to be held, comforted, cooed to, and when he was, he settled.

His distressed face vanished and his whimpering simmered until he laid slack against Magnus' chest, snuggling close to him for protection. On particularly bad nights he would cling to Magnus' chestplate, refusing to let go until the morning when Magnus had to pry him off to get up.

The coming morning was special, today was the day.

Like usual, Rodimus rose from Magnus bed roughly an hour or two after him and sluggishly walked into the kitchen to find a large breakfast awaiting him. The island in the middle of the kitchen had already been set with plates and their glasses had already been filled with energon.

"Ah, good, you're awake." Setting a data pad down that he had been reading the local news on, Magnus gestured for Rodimus to sit by an already filled plate of food. "I have some good news to share with you."

Good news?

Rubbing the sleep from his optics, Rodimus pulled out his chair and sat himself at his designated spot by the island. Licking his lips as he looked over the generously filled plate, he picked up his fork and dug in.

His spoiler flapped in delight behind him, and he purred softly, his vocalizer only catching and making him cough once. He had grown tired of drinking regular grade energon laced with a bit of medical grade. As would any mech on a liquid diet, he was pleased to finally eat something serious. It had taken him a long time for his tank to settle enough to eat anything more than a few sips of energon at a time without the fear of his tank being pumped, and even then eating anything other than biscuits had his tank turning, but now as his body progressed in a positive manner, he could eat more.

"Today," Magnus began as he watched Rodimus stuff a slice of pancake into his mouth, "we are going to get your paint job." Rodimus fork stopped abruptly by his mouth and he stared at

Magnus a moment.

Really?

As if he could hear Rodimus' thoughts, Magnus nodded to him, and right then did his spoiler flap in delight against his back.

"As soon as you're done eating we can go-" Before he could finish his sentence Rodimus started to stuff forkful after forkful of food into his mouth. Swallowing massive bites, he couldn't eat fast enough. "Roddy, slow down, slow-" Raising his hands and making a calming gesture, Magnus tried to slow him down. "Relax; there is no need to rush. We have all day. Just enjoy your breakfast."

There had been plenty of reason for Rodimus though, today was the day he would no longer look like a pleasure mech. Today was the day he could finally be like everybody else. Today was the day.

He nearly pressed himself through the front display window upon arrival, ogling every single one of the paint patterns on display. There had been so many more choices than before, or had there been? He couldn't remember. All he cared about was picking one, but which one? At first Magnus thought he could be indecisive with so many options and the freedom to choose what he wanted, but being pressed up against the glass the way he was, his attention was on a singular body style.

Glancing over his shoulder, Rodimus looked at Magnus, his optics pleading.

"You can pick whatever one you want Roddy." He wouldn't impede Rodimus' choice even if he selected a color combination that made him cringe, though he hoped Rodimus had good judgment.

He watched Rodimus' flutter at the aspect of getting to pick what he wanted, and again his attention was directed back through the display glass. Somewhere in the back out of Magnus' sight something was suiting Rodimus' fancy. Whatever it was, Magnus didn't put much effort trying to see what it was. A part of him wanted it to be a surprise, to see Rodimus revamped and restored with fresh optics. "Come on Roddy, let's head inside."

Holding the door open for Rodimus and entering after the smaller mech skipped inside, Magnus headed right for the counter. Meanwhile Rodimus occupied himself while Magnus discussed payment with the clerk by wandering the side wall of mods.

The shop was an average body shop, hosting very little exotic mods and more so for armor durability and speed. There were a few pieces of thicker armor on display and without hesitation Rodimus touched them.

His vocalizer clicked and beeped when he tried to make a noise of surprise, the armor was satisfyingly smooth.

"Roddy-" Magnus' voice broke Rodimus' thoughts as he looked up at the larger mech by the counter. He waved Rodimus over and he obeyed, standing by Magnus' side and then looking at the clerk.

The clerk was no taller than he was and a soft baby blue color from head to toe. She smiled at him fondly and then looked up at Magnus. He watched the towering mech slowly kneel down onto one knee, getting to his height.

"Are you ready?" Magnus' voice took up that soft sweet tone.

Hell yeah, I'm ready.

Nodding quickly, Rodimus gave Magnus a smile. It was genuine, delighted, and all around thrilled. At one point Magnus had thought he would never see a thing like that from Rodimus, and yet-

"Good, now Roddy listen," Placing his hands on Rodimus' shoulders, Magnus took in a deep breath, "You're getting a full armor rework. Some if not all of your plating doesn't fit you anymore and it needs to be replaced." That hadn't been a secret. The wires popping from several seams along Rodimus' body and the way he carried his aching body was a dead giveaway. "It's going to take a while to do, and I won't be in the back while they work on you." The smile along Rodimus' face faltered a bit and his optics seemed to wander to a corner of the room.

He hadn't thought about that, being left alone with strangers.

As if to sense the wave of uneasy washing over Rodimus' little frame, Magnus gave his shoulders a gentle squeeze.

"But that doesn't mean I'm leaving you here." Rodimus' optics wandered back to Magnus. "I'll be right here in the lobby waiting for you. You'll only be one room over, one door away." He could tell it was doing little to sooth Rodimus growing anxiety. "Roddy," sliding his hands up to cup at Rodimus' cheeks, Magnus smiled, "nothing bad will happen to you as long as I am here. I promise."

Placing his hands against the back of Magnus' palms, Rodimus pressed Magnus' hands even harder into his cheeks.

Okay. I... I trust you.

Nodding between Magnus' hands, Rodimus relaxed. Magnus had done nothing but the best for him, so why doubt him now. He would be right here if he needed him.

"Good." Allowing himself to rise from his knee, Magnus withdrew his hands and looked at the clerk.

"Ready to go?" Her voice was sweet and kind, Magnus having warned her beforehand about Rodimus struggles. He kept it vague but mentioned quick contact was likely to startle Rodimus and it was best to let him know everything as they worked to soothe his worries. "Come on sweet thing, just this way." Holding out her hand to Rodimus, she waited for him to take it. "We'll take good care of you, don't worry. You'll be bright and new in no time." Gently tugged towards a door in the back that lead to the workshop, Rodimus gave one last glance over his shoulder towards Magnus.

There was a small hopeful smile on his face as he waved to Rodimus who vanished past the door.

With a soft sigh, Magnus sat himself down in one of the chairs in the lobby and waited. It only took a half an hour before he started to hear the muffled noise of machinery no doubt starting to replace Rodimus' armor. The odd part was every hour there was a long pause between noises and Magnus wondered if it was Rodimus needing a break. Was he doing okay in there? Was he scared?

Was he hurting? It bothered Magnus more than he thought not knowing. Not being able to step in and make *sure* Rodimus was okay without him having to call for him made his spark ache. He would just have to wait, and wait he did.

It had taken a total of three hours before the clerk stepped out from the workshop, a huge smile spread across her face despite Rodimus not following behind her.

Standing abruptly, Magnus met her in the middle of the room, leaning slightly to one side to see if Rodimus was just delayed in exiting.

"Are you ready to see him?" She seemed oddly delighted, proud even.

"Yes." Magnus anxiously nodded.

"Come on out Rodimus!" The clerk called over her shoulder and Magnus looked up towards the workshop door.

A silver pronged foot stepped out from behind the door, and then a vibrant red and gold body followed after it. Stepping further out into the lobby, Rodimus body was a breathtaking combination of orange, red, and gold. His chest was the only part of his body that seemed to harbor the most detail, as a large red and gold flame was painted across it.

He glowed, his armor no longer harboring a single scuff, chip of paint, or a dent. The evident finger marks that Magnus had tried to smooth out of his spoiler were nowhere to be seen. The wires that popped from his seams were tucked and wrapped nearly under his new more comfortable armor, and the disgusting welt of a weld that had run along his navel was gone. The entire piece of armor was gone, leaving nothing but a perfect body behind. He wasn't new in the slightest, but reborn, refreshed, and on his way to his second chance at life.

Spark fluttering so hard behind his chestplate, Magnus unconsciously brought a hand up towards his chest. He felt his breath catch and his vents stutter, utterly breathless at the beautiful sight.

Rodimus had always been good looking, even in shambles he carried a beauty about himself, but now... now he was stunning. Whether he knew it or not, he was just... perfect.

"The flame is fitting." Stepping closer to Rodimus, Magnus watched his cheeks flush and what he thought sounded like a small laugh escape from Rodimus body.

He still wheezed and his vocalizer clicked, but soon that wouldn't be a problem anymore.

"You look beautiful." Voice heavy with affection, Magnus watched Rodimus' spoiler flap upwards and his face tint. He whirled around, putting his hands on his hips in an attempt to act cool but it was evident he was hiding his beat red face.

His vocalizer squeaked and beeped as he laughed, and he coughed, settling himself down.

"Thank you," Magnus turned towards the clerk and pulled out his data stick, "Thank you for this." Handing over the data stick and allowing the clerk to scan it and withdraw credits, she handed it back to Magnus.

"You're welcome, sweatspark. You two take care now."

Exiting the shop side by side, they stood on the outskirts of the marketplace. By this point it was midday and the vendors were buzzing with life. Crowds had gathered and mass groups of

people and aliens alike moved past one another.

"Come on, let's get home." Waving Rodimus on to follow him, Magnus had expected Rodimus to cling to his side like before, but instead he walked by his side. His head was held high and he stepped with confidence, a smile that seemed permanent still spread across his face.

Every time they merged through a mass clump of people, Rodimus would cling close to Magnus, but when there was more room he left an even amount of space between them. It was pleasing to see Rodimus skittish self dwindling, and a new version of himself forming. Already he had grown so much, and still he had more to do.

The feeling of something snaking into Magnus' large palm drew his attention away from navigating a path through the bustling marketplace.

Looking down at Rodimus, Magnus raised an eyebrow when he saw the little mech was properly avoiding his gaze. He's closed his optics and puffed out his cheeks in some sort of a pout.

Below, Rodimus had snuck his little hand into Magnus and laced their fingers together. His spoiler had dropped submissively, and his cheeks flared a light tint of pink. Feeling instantly embarrassed for doing so, Rodimus had averted his gaze when Magnus looked down. That did not deter him from releasing Magnus' hand, but instead squeezing it a little harder.

There was that odd sensation of his spark pulsing against his chest again, and Magnus decided to embrace it. Squeezing Rodimus' hand back, he looked up towards the crowd and continued to navigate through it.

He'd roused himself earlier from bed than usual, stress weighing him down as he started from room to room with papers stacked in his arms. For hours he mumbled to himself, cursing softly when papers slipped from the stacks nearly placed in his arms to float to the floor.

As he had been aware of before, his vacation time was slowly drying up, and normally he would be thrilled. Before Rodimus came along he had loathed the idea of relaxing, which started him on his little side job in the first place. Except now it had become more than a job, it was personal.

He had maybe, *maybe* a week left before he would have to report back to duty, maybe two if he pushed it. Except there was still the issue of what to do with Rodimus when that time came. No matter what he couldn't stay cooped up in the apartment like some animal. Neither of them could. Rodimus wasn't a pet or an object for him to possess. If he wanted to go, Magnus wouldn't stop him.

Still, Magnus hadn't gotten any closer as to identifying who Rodimus really was, but perhaps with help back in the main city it would be easier. At least there was that to look forward to when he finally had to head back. Perhaps it would help in placing Rodimus somewhere safe-somewhere he could prosper.

Without Magnus.

Ignoring the ache in his spark, Magnus moved into his office, and then back out into the living area to retrieve the next neat stack of papers on the new coffee table. Back and forth he

went, time slipping from his mind as he worked.

He hadn't noticed how much time had passed until he looked up and spotted Rodimus staring at him from the doorway of the kitchen. He hadn't even noticed Rodimus get up and move through the hall into the kitchen in the first place he had been so occupied on getting his work done.

Rodimus' expression was worried and he thumbed at a half empty cube of energon in his hands.

"I'm sorry Roddy, I didn't hear you get up." Dropping down the last stack of papers on the coffee table and fixing each paper until they aligned perfectly, Magnus let out a tired sigh. "Is something wrong?" He could see the hesitant look on the smaller mech's face before he extended the half filled cube of energon.

Even without having to tell Magnus it was the last cube he had, Magnus knew. He had been too busy to go to the market to restock and with the pile of work growing ever higher he probably wouldn't be able to go until later. Normally that would have been fine if he was living alone, but Rodimus would get hungry.

"I'm sorry Roddy, I forgot to restock." Taking the cube from Rodimus and looking it over, Magnus made note that there was at least enough energon inside of it for one meal. Without hesitation he handed it back to Rodimus, wanting him to eat it.

He wasn't going to deny Rodimus a meal, and he wasn't all that hungry anyway.

"Eat, later I'll head to the marketplace and pick up more supplies." As of right now, he couldn't. Reports needed to be read, signed, and sent before noon or he would be behind when he returned to duty.

"SSzzk." Rodimus' glistening spoiler wiggled as he patted the top of the cube. "ZZk." Lifting his hand and pointing out the window in the direction of the market place, Rodimus looked back at Magnus.

I can go. I know where it is.

By this point in time he had walked the few blocks with Magnus enough to have memorized the route to the market district. Even better, he knew all the vendors Magnus likes to buy foods from.

Pointing a bit harder to get his point across, Rodimus patted the cube again.

"You... want to go?" Magnus asked to try and clarify what Rodimus was trying to tell him. "By yourself?" It had only been a day since Rodimus' body rework, but his confidence had bloomed instantly the moment they left the shop the day before. As much as Magnus approved of that, the idea of letting Rodimus out alone made his tank twist.

A no is at the tip of his tongue, and he feels a knot swell in his intake before swallowing it down. Rodimus wasn't a child, and wasn't a position, at some point Magnus *would* have to let him go, no matter how hard it hurt. Even if Rodimus was just heading to the market, the thought of him not being here beside him had his spark aching. Somehow, time with Rodimus had suddenly become precious.

"Alright," He had to remind himself Rodimus becoming more independent was a good thing and that he would come back. He was just going to the market, and he seemed happy about it, "give me your arm."

Lifting his right arm and holding it in front of Magnus, Rodimus watched him flip open a part of his armor and type something into his manual HUD.

"This is my personal com line. If you need something, or need help, just ping this and I will answer right away. Here is also a list of a few supplies I want you to grab other than energon. If you forget some it's okay." Closing the little hatch, Magnus let Rodimus' arm fall from his grip. "Here," Reaching into his own subspace and pulling out a data drive, Magnus handed it over to Rodimus, "this is a credit drive, just give it to a vendor and it will automatically charge for the purchase. It's preloaded and should have more than enough on it for fuel and supplies."

Okay, I've got this.

Internally looking over the list of supplies Magnus had requested, Rodimus nodded to Magnus to confirm. He turned towards the door but felt his arm suddenly catch on something.

Glancing over his shoulder to see Magnus holding his wrist, he raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Roddy," Magnus said softly, "Be careful." Letting Rodimus' wrist slide from his thick fingers, he watched the red and gold mech nod at him and head for the front door. Opening it on his own for the first time and stepping out, he was gone.

For the first time ever the normally peaceful silence of the apartment wasn't natural. It was lonely, and soon it would be Magnus' world all over again.

Everything had been fine up until Rodimus reached just outside of the apartment complexes doors. Even then he had managed a few steps down the curb before the sudden swell of anxiety crept through his chest.

He pushed on, one foot after the other but slowly it became increasingly difficult. Eventually he had to stop at a crossing, unable to leave the block Magnus' apartment was planted on. Instead he looked over his shoulder at the building, wondering if Magnus was looking down at him just standing there.

Aliens and other mechs gathered around him as they waited for the street sign to signal them to cross, and Rodimus felt himself growing tense. He clenched his fists by his sides, his spoiler dropping down to make himself look as nonthreatening as possible.

He hadn't noticed right away, at least not until the light had changed and as a group they had started to cross that nobody was staring at him. Nobody even gave him a second glance at all like they had when he was bent out of shape and dirty. There were no ugly scars to star at, no finger marks on his spoiler, no peeling paint. He was blending in, much like everybody else around him, he was *normal*.

He had felt confident walking by Magnus' side, but now, on his own, his spark flared to life. *This* was normal, *this* was freedom.

Behind himself, his spoiler slowly rose to its natural height behind him. He tilted his head up, unclenched his fists and walked with the group until finally the marketplace was visible.

As per usual, the marketplace was humming with life, several strange smells wafting through

the air as all sorts of aliens foods were presented on the front racks of each vendor.

As Rodimus walked through the clusters of people, he found himself lingering at a few stands, simply enjoying the freedom of being out on his own. When he rounded a corner and spotted the usual stand Magnus frequented for energon, he went straight to it.

Pulling up the list Magnus had supplied him on his HUD, he went through it to make sure he got what he was instructed to.

High grade, medium grade, medical grade.

Nothing he didn't already know Magnus wanted, and as he pointed to the cubes, the vendor handed them over. In exchange, Rodimus handed over the credit chit and waited for the vendor to hand it back.

Arms overflowing with energon cubes, Rodimus silently wished he had brought something to carry them in. If Magnus had been here they probably would have fit in his subspace with little to no issue, but they were far too large for Rodimus'. No matter, he could carry them.

Across from the energon stand was a sweets stand and right away Rodimus diverted his attention to it. He could tell right away which ones were laced with energon, considering their vibrant pink and blue glows.

There were several single candies that could be bought, or little boxes filled with a variety of them. Some of the boxes were wrapped with neat little bows on top, presenting as perfect little gifts.

A blue one catches Rodimus' attention, and for a moment he hesitates and looks at his credit chit.

Candies are not on the list of things Magnus wanted... and yet.

Pointing at the blue box, Rodimus handed the chit over to the vendor and took his prize happily. Taking his credit back he turned around, optics focused on the box.

I wonder if Mags even likes candy.

There had probably been a lot of other items in the marketplace that would present as better gifts to Magnus than sweets, but for now these would do. It was the *least* he could offer Magnus for doing all that he had done for Rodimus, considering he couldn't really *say* thank you.

Well, if he doesn't like them... at least I can eat them.

Purring in delight, Rodimus hugged the candies and energon close to his chest. Turning around and deciding it was time to head back home with his haul, Rodimus' frame suddenly stopped dead in its tracks.

His joints locked and his optics rotated as they locked onto something across the marketplace. His chest tightened and he felt the breath ripped from his vents as a towering figure pushed through the clumps of people.

No.

Unlike before there was no mistaking it this time. That blood red armor, that deep and soulless black visor, those heavy footsteps shaking the ground.

Not him.

He had mistaken another mech before for the Crimson mech, but no matter how many times he blinked and forced his optics to reset... *it was him.*

The massive mech lumbered through the crowd, shoving aliens and mechs alike out of his way as he moved.

Stepping back and bumping his aft against the vendors table, Rodimus begged for his limbs to move. Still frozen in utter horror at the prospect of this animal having found him had his world shattering around him.

He hadn't heard the vendor cursing at him, he hadn't heard anything except a high pitched ringing in his audio and the thumping of his spark beating against his chest so hard it might break out.

He hadn't realized his grip on the energon cubes had tightened to the point a few of them had started to crack under the pressure.

Across the plaza, the Crimson mech looked up, and for a singular moment, Rodimus felt their gazes meet.

In that moment Rodimus forced his legs to listen, and he flung himself behind the vendor's booth, slamming his back against it.

He heaved, unable to breath, his vents flapping open and closed sporadically as he struggled to get control of himself. It didn't work, and he continued to hyperventilate, his optics flickering around for anywhere to run, anywhere to go that isn't near *him.*

H-how?! How did he... how-

Throwing himself from the back of the booth and bolting as fast as his legs can take him down a random street, Rodimus doesn't look back. The feeling of suffocation and massive hands squeezing him until he pops keep him from looking back.

Holding the cubes of energon tight to his chest as he ran, he dashed down the first alleyway he came across. Without thinking, he threw himself behind a dumpster, desperate for anywhere to hide.

Sitting as close to the dumpster's side as possible and scrunching himself up into as small of a shape as possible, Rodimus squeezed his eyes shut.

How is this possible... how did he... how did he find me? The collar... The collars gone!

The ringing in his audio hadn't stopped, and he felt sick.

Wake up, wake up, wake up! It's just a nightmare! WAKE UP!

Rocking back and forth, Rodimus shook his head. Coolant stung at the bottom of his optics and he bared his teeth.

This isn't real, this isn't real!

Magnus watched from the window as the sun started to sink past the horizon line, staining the sky a lovely pastel pink. It sadly wouldn't last long as several thick storm clouds had started to roll in and already droplets of rain speckled the window.

Magnus had assumed Rodimus would be out for an hour or two, but several hours? As time passed he grew more and more worried until finally the anxiety had gotten the better of him. Over and over he checked his internal HUD for pings from Rodimus but none showed up.

What if something had happened to him and he was unable to ping him? What if he had gotten hurt? Or lost? What if he had run away? Why hadn't he gone with him?

Cursing himself for being a fool, Magnus paced, as much as he wanted to give Rodimus the benefit of the doubt to return, it seemed less likely as time went on. Heavier and heavier his spark grew until finally he decides to go looking.

Rushing from his apartment and down to street level, he doesn't walk, but transforms and speeds off to the marketplace. Arriving there in record time, he transforms a little too fast, causing him feet to skid along the ground.

"Roddy?" By this time the normally bustling plaza has settled. The mass amounts of people have reduced to small clusters, small enough that large spaces are made and plenty of room is left to walk. "Roddy?" Magnus doesn't shout, hoping Rodimus simply was easily distracted by the booths, but despite towering over most of the normal customers, Magnus couldn't see him.

Not paying much mind to where he had been walking, Magnus felt his shoulder bump against somebody.

"Excuse me, sorry-" Turning to face whoever he had bumped into, Magnus felt himself taken aback a bit to lock gazes with a mech equal to his size.

"Tsk." The crimson colored mech snorted at him in disgust, shoving his way past Magnus. Their visor brightens, something about it making Magnus feel uneasy. He doesn't say anything, his masked face keeping any sort of expression hidden, but that evil sensation is there and doesn't dwindle with he turns away from Magnus.

Watching the mech vanish in the opposite direction, Magnus turns back around and continues his search. Right away he heads to the energon vendor who is in the process of closing up shop.

"Excuse me-" Magnus says to the vendor who has his back to him, "excuse me."

"We're closed for the night, come back tomorrow." Still the vendor didn't face him.

"No, I'm not here to buy anything. Have you seen a cybertronian about this tall," Gesturing with his hand, Magnus watched the vendor look over his shoulder, "he's red, orange, and gold and has a flame painted across his chest. I'm looking for him."

"Yeah, he was here earlier, bought a few things too."

"And? Did you see where he went?"

"Yeah, kid turned around after buying something and looked like he had seen a ghost. Knocked half my merch over when he backed up into my table. Took off running that way-" Pointing behind the stand, Magnus followed the vendor's direction. It certainly wasn't the way

home, and something had scared Rodimus enough to flee that way.

"Thank you." Taking off down the street the vendor had directed him too, Magnus jogged. Pausing by an ally to catch his breath, he looked around, not sure where Rodimus would have gone from here. It would be difficult or near impossible to find him if he had gotten himself lost in the city.

The sound of something shuffling in the alleyway has Magnus standing at attention. His optics shift and rotate, trying to lock onto any movement. At first there is nothing, but then a glint of light catches his attention. Reflecting off the familiar pronged toe of Rodimus' foot, Magnus watches it quickly sink back behind the dumpster.

Jerking forward and rushing into the ally, Magnus dashes around the dumpster.

"Roddy?"

"NZZZSK!" Rodimus' vocalizer screeched as he threw himself back against the wall, utterly horrified. "SSZKK-" He flinched, curling in on himself and sobbing into the shattered energon cubes.

"Rodimus! Roddy, it's me, it's Magnus-" Kneeling down but not touching Rodimus, Magnus waits as patiently as possible for Rodimus to look at him.

He doesn't seem to register Magnus right away and that utterly horrified look stays on his tear soaked face until finally he breaks down. His sobs are glitched and almost silent, but he cried anyway. Tear after tear waterfalls from his face as he drops the cubes by his sides.

A combination of rain and energon had him soaked, but that didn't stop Magnus from moving in and embracing him tightly against his chest.

"I'm here; I'm here now... shh." He rocked with Rodimus, feeling the smaller mech cling to him or dear life. "You're alright. I have you." The sobs never stopped, and Rodimus refused to let Magnus go. "What happened? Roddy, what happened?" There was no answer... just the long, struggled sobs of a terrified mech.

He's here Mags, he's here.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I regretted not splitting this up into two last chapters but since I already said it was gonna end on 10, I had set it in stone. So this chapter is... 14,000+ words
My goal for this fic before I had started writing it was to get it to 60k words and I blew past it so im pretty happy with that.

He had never wanted to push Rodimus into doing something he didn't want to. Having spent so much time learning his body language and personal needs, Magnus had always been more than happy to give him space to function. He never wanted to force Rodimus, but as of right now it was coming down to it.

No matter how many times Magnus has said the alley was safe, Rodimus wouldn't budge from his spot behind the dumpster. At first Magnus had been patient, cooing to Rodimus the best he could and trying to ease his fears, but it didn't work. The hug they had briefly shared ended with Rodimus wishing himself from Magnus' arms when he felt the larger mech trying to take him from his hiding spot.

To Magnus, he didn't understand. Everything outside of the alley was safe, why was Rodimus giving him such a hard time. He had walked through the streets and seen nothing, heard nothing, what could possibly have set him off so badly?

"Roddy, please," Magnus insisted, trying once again to take Rodimus' hand to help him up from the grimy ground, "if you stay out in this rain any longer you're going to get sick! You're already soaking wet! Please, get up!" Magnus himself had already been soaked in the brief moments he had been outside. Rodimus was soaked to the core by this point. He was trembling and Magnus wasn't sure if it was the cold exactly or whatever it was scaring him. Regardless, he had to do something.

Reaching down and grabbing Rodimus' wrist, Magnus pulled him up. When he felt Rodimus tug on him, he didn't let go like he normally would have. Instead he kept pulling, dragging Rodimus out from behind the dumpster and into the alleyway.

Putting on the breaks, Rodimus dug his heels into the ground, panic flooding his face when he realized Magnus was having no issue pulling him out.

"Nnnzz!" Protesting, Rodimus yanked back harder, his spoiler flapping profusely behind his back. He kicked and yanked, but Magnus was ten times stronger than him. So much so that when he pulled Rodimus, he lifted him off the ground for a moment, causing his pronged feet to skid along the ground in protest. "Bzzk!"

"Rodimus, please," Yanking Rodimus away from the dumpster and closer to the alleys exit, Magnus pleaded "just calm down!" But with each step closer to the main road, Rodimus' flailing increased. Despite being as gentle as possible, Magnus' actions only irritated Rodimus further. He opened his mouth and tried to scream, but instead an assortment of beeps and screeches escaped him instead. "Roddy! What's gotten into you! I'm here now, relax! Nothing is going to happen. You're safe!" Every word was hollow, at least to Rodimus.

The already desperate struggles became something more feral. His attempt to break away from Magnus quickly shifted course. There was no way he was going to be able to escape Magnus' grip, so instead he went after Magnus.

His free fist came up first and he swung blindly, grazing the side of Magnus' chin. When it came up a second time, he connected to the corner of Magnus' mouth.

"Rodimus!" Magnus snapped, his voice a terrifying thoom now as Rodimus' little fist came up again to strike him. A second good punch to the lip and Magnus had it. "Enough!" Snatching Rodimus' fist with his other hand, Magnus yanked him close, perhaps a little too hard.

Chests colliding, Rodimus felt the wind leave his vents and before he could even catch his breath, Magnus massive arms coiled around him. Squeezing him securely against his chest and pinning him in place with his arms pressed to his sides, Rodimus wheezed.

The struggling hadn't stopped there, despite having lost the ability to punch Magnus in the face, Rodimus' could still kick. Legs dangling free below, he swing them, digging his pronged toe tips into Magnus' legs.

"Stop it!" Magnus hissed, feeling the sharp prong tips poke into his armor. "Enough!" This had been so unlike Rodimus. He had *never* raised his hand against Magnus, or even given him the slight indication that he had ever wanted too. Sure in the beginning Magnus had his fair share of the cold shoulder, but at no point had Rodimus ever felt the need to assault him to feel safe.

The punches hurt Magnus' spark more than his face, leaving him with nothing but a scuffed lip. The kicks on the other hand hurt a bit more, and with each new one Magnus could feel his armor denting.

Squeezing Rodimus a little tighter, Magnus pulled him out onto the main road as quickly as he could. In a split second his body was changing, shifting around Rodimus and enveloping him into the working metal.

Sucked into Magnus' alt mode, Rodimus felt himself being thrown into the cabin. Landing hard on his back on the soft cushions that made up Magnus' front seats, Rodimus laid there. Heaving in air and trying to process what had happened, Rodimus' optics flicked all about. He grabbed for anything to hold onto, finding nothing but the seat he had been laying on.

"Just relax, we're going home." Magnus' voice sounded through the cabin, calmer now. His alt mode roared to life, and he began to drive down the road in the direction of home.

Despite the windows inside of Magnus' alt mode being slightly tinted, Rodimus remained flat on his back. The last thing he wanted was for the Crimson mech, if he was still out there to see him and follow him home.

We have to get out of here... we have to leave... we have to leave...

Rodimus' vents flapped as he felt himself starting to hyperventilate. Struggling to maintain control of his breathing, he rolled over onto his side pressing his face into Magnus' seat. Squeezing his optics shut, he curled up into himself.

We have to go... we have to leave... please please please please.

Rodimus had clung himself so hard against Magnus the entire walk up to their apartment that he actually could have been one with Magnus' armor. He squashed himself against Magnus' chest, keeping himself as flat against Magnus as he possibly could while the large mech carried him into the elevator.

He had expected Rodimus to settle and relax once they were in the safety of his apartment, but he hadn't. His grip on the larger mech remained and he made no noise of protest to be put down. Instead he squeezed Magnus harder when he felt him trying to pry him off.

As gently as possible he peeled Rodimus tense finger from the seams of his armor and set him down on the floor.

"Roddy-" Magnus began but was cut off when Rodimus turned away from him, rushing right over to the larger window. Pulling back the curtain and peeking outside, Rodimus scanned the streets below. After a moment he turned back around, his face laced with worry as his optics darted all around the room. He clenched and unclenched his fists, his jaw working as he ground his teeth together, seeming intensely paranoid.

"Rodimus," Watching Rodimus peek outside once more, Magnus continued, "what happened?" To no one's surprise the question had gone unanswered and instead Rodimus paced past Magnus, ignoring him completely.

Rushing over to the front door and engaging the lock, Rodimus stepped back to evaluate its effectiveness. In reality, it wouldn't really be effective at all. Sure it would stop burglars but a mech the size of the Crimson mech, unlikely. If he wanted to he could put his fist through the door without a second thought.

This realization only seemed to irritate Rodimus more, and he bit at the tip of his thumb in thought. A few soft clicks escaped his vocalizer and he whirled back around, once again passing Magnus and taking up his place by the window. Peeking out once more, he kept himself primarily hidden behind the curtain as if afraid someone out there might see him.

At a loss for what to do or even say, all Magnus could do was rub at the back of his neck and sigh. Perhaps giving Rodimus a little space to settle on his own was what he needed, because Magnus sure couldn't think of anything else other than letting the little hot rod be.

Licking his split lip and turning on the holo screen for some soft noise, Magnus sits. Hopefully by dinner time Rodimus will have simmered enough to try and communicate what happened.

Except as the hours passed, he hadn't. He kept up his pacing, chewing on his fingers so much that the paint had started to chip. Despite Magnus getting up and pulling his hands away from his mouth, Rodimus always brought them back up to gnaw on them moments later.

Having taken a look out the window himself, Magnus scanned the streets below. Nothing had seemed out of the ordinary, and the darker it became the less cars and pedestrians that passed. Not a single threatening thing stood outside, and yet Rodimus just *had* to constantly check every few seconds.

Added to his nervous pacing, Rodimus would go up to the front door every few minutes to inspect it and make sure he had actually locked it. As if he had forgotten to, he would suddenly stiffen and rush to the door to *make sure* he had actually locked it. Going as far to even touch the

lock and make sure his optics were not playing tricks on him. It would sooth him for only a few minutes but he *had* to go back to look at it no matter how many times he had confirmed it was locked.

Eventually, Rodimus did slow down, but hadn't stopped. His hips ached and his optics seemed sunken into his pale face as he trudged back and forth. Exhausted, he wanted nothing more than to lay down and put an end to this awful day, but he couldn't. The thought of letting his guard down caused a wave of anxiety to flutter through his chest, and that was all it took for him to keep going. If he let his guard down for even a moment, stopped checking out the window for a minute, maybe the Crimson mech will be there. For that one moment he isn't looking, he might just show up. So he has to keep looking, keep checking, keep assuring himself that he's hidden, but deep down he knows he isn't sure.

Hours earlier Magnus had set out energon for him, but it had been ignored, and finally Magnus had had enough. Tired of watching Rodimus pace himself into exhaustion, Magnus stepped into Rodimus' path.

Scrunching his face in slight irritation as his path was intercepted, Rodimus tried to move around Magnus.

"Rodimus," Before the smaller mech could side step him, Magnus cupped Rodimus' cheeks as gently as possible, "enough." He squeezed, running his thumbs under Rodimus' baggy optics.

The faint blue of Rodimus' optics flickered, fearful as he looked past Magnus at the window and then back to Magnus.

"Enough." Magnus repeated himself, his voice soft. "No more of this." His thumbs continues to rub Rodimus' cheeks, tracing the fine line that sculpted them.

Lower lip quivering, Rodimus looked down, his optics dimming as he reached up and pressed his palms against Magnus' hands. Pressing them harder into his cheeks, he kept shaking his head.

You don't understand.

If the Crimson mech found out where he was... found out Magnus was with him, he would no doubt *hurt* Magnus. It didn't matter that Magnus was equal in size, the Crimson mech was brutal, cruel, and would do anything to get what he wanted. Knowing this first hand, Rodimus nuzzled one of Magnus' palms.

Could Magnus even fight him if it came down to it? He seemed more like a paper pusher than anything else, how was he supposed to protect him? How was he going to stop himself from getting killed just trying to protect *him*. What if Magnus gets killed because of *him*? All of this would have been for nothing and he would end up right back with the Masters as a premium pleasure slave until his spark finally burnt out.

You don't understand.

If the Crimson mech had seen him, and he *knew* he had, he would stop at nothing to get him back. He had been gone from the Master so long now his absence must be known.

You don't understand.

Panic swelled harder than ever behind Rodimus' chest plate and he felt his intake

narrowing. His vents flapped in protest as he tried to breath, finding it difficult. The thought of losing Magnus sinking in, and causing him to rattle in his own armor.

He pressed Magnus' hands even harder into his face, not wanting him to let go for even a moment.

Something soft and warm pressed itself against Rodimus' forehead, pulling him from his panicked thought. Not realizing he had squeezed his optics shut, he opened them, blinking in confusion as he looked up to see Magnus pressing his lips to his head.

Coolant slipped from Rodimus' optics, sliding down his cheeks and against Magnus' hand.

The kiss had only lasted a moment, enough to pull Rodimus from his fears and bring him back to Magnus loving touch.

Breaths settling, Rodimus unclenched his frame, allowing himself to relax and his tense spoiler to drop. Loosening his grip on Magnus' hands, he wilted in place.

Drawing him into his frame and coiling his arms around Rodimus tired body, Magnus gently swayed. Sliding a large hand between Rodimus' shoulder blades, Magnus rubbed. Pressing into Rodimus' spinal strut and rubbing up and down soothingly, Magnus felt Rodimus take in a deep breath and sigh against him.

The back rub was nice, and by this point Magnus had figured out all the right places to rub. The area Rodimus liked the most was where his spoiler connected to his back. Just the slightest rub there had his armor expanding and settling. It felt good, better than good, it was enough to lull Rodimus' optics offline, enough to have his pounding spark finally pulsing at a calm pace.

Standing there and just absorbing Magnus' loving touch, Rodimus onlined his optics once more when he felt himself behind pushed back.

"We should get you cleaned up." Still drenched to the core with energon and whatever grime was in the alley, Rodimus was looking a bit ragged. His legs were muddy and his chest sticky, leaving his once vibrant paint job rather dull.

Looking down at himself and then up to Magnus, Rodimus frowned.

"It's alright, nothing a good wash cannot fix." A hot bath should help him feel better, plus chase off the chill from the rain. "Come on." Splaying his hand out against Rodimus' back, Magnus gently coaxes Rodimus towards the washroom.

Once inside, Magnus leaves Rodimus' side for a moment to kneel beside the bath. Turning the nozzle and running his hand under the water to make sure it was getting warm, Magnus stood.

Standing behind Magnus without a sound, Rodimus glances up at him when he turns around. He had a soft smile on his face, despite his puffy lip as he offered the tub to Rodimus.

Without making a sound, Rodimus walked past him, stepping into the water and slowly allowing himself to sink. Lower and lower until finally he was sitting, he sank down until just his chin was above the water line.

He didn't move past that, didn't try to wash himself, or even look at Magnus. Instead he just sat there, watching the steam waft upwards. He didn't look up when he heard Magnus move about the washroom, or even when he came back and sat close to the tubs edge.

“Do you mind?” Holding up a washcloth and some solvents, Magnus waited for Rodimus to look at them. He sighed, and after a brief pause, meagerly nodded.

Dipping the cloth into the water, Magnus rubbed the solvent bar against it until it was nice and lathered. Once satisfied with the suds he began to wash Rodimus’ shoulders. Dragging the cloth around the back of Rodimus’ neck, and then back towards his chest to scrub some grime off.

They sat there without a word, Magnus unsure of what to say. There really was nothing to say. He could tell Rodimus over and over that everything was alright, but tonight he didn’t seem to believe him. For now, it was best to get cleaned up and rest, the next few days were going to be busy.

Optics brightening when Magnus ran the cloth over Rodimus’ cheek, the hot rod made sort of an annoyed face. He leaned slightly away, but Magnus’ cloth followed, determined to get the muck off.

“Nzzzk-” Rodimus protests, but ultimately allows Magnus to finish. He’s too tired to fight him, and in truth, the wash felt nice. His joints hurt, and he was finally feeling the weight of recharge pressing down on him. How late was it? He had lost track of time pacing. I was late for sure, considering he had peeked out the window long enough that it had grown dark outside.

“Alright,” Magnus’ voice pulled Rodimus from his thoughts, “let’s get you dried off.” Offering Rodimus his hand, Magnus waited for him to take it before pulling him up to stand.

Offering Rodimus a towel, the hot rod took it and unfolded it. With little energy, he wiped himself down, ending with his face.

“Roddy,” Pulling the towel away from his optics, Rodimus looked up with heavy optics, “are you hungry.” He hadn’t eaten since this morning, and Magnus had hoped after simmering and the bath he would be.

A part of him shouldn’t have been surprised Rodimus shook his head, rejecting the food in favor of checking the window one more time.

It had been too dark now to see the main road despite the few street lights. Only the spots the light had illuminated were visible, and each one was bare.

The night like always was calm and quiet.

Setting his hand down on Rodimus’ shoulder and squeezing, Magnus watched as Rodimus glanced over his shoulder at him.

“We should rest, it’s late, and it’s been a long day.” He had been right about that. The day had been long, too long. “Come on.” Again Magnus shouldn’t have been surprised that Rodimus hesitated, seeming to favor looking out the window than resting. “Come on-” Lightly tugging on Rodimus’ shoulder, Magnus let out a content sigh when the smaller mech finally turned towards him. Begrudgingly he followed Magnus into his bedroom.

Like always Magnus settled first, laying down and waiting for Rodimus to take up his usual space pressed against his back. Though instead of that, Rodimus climbed up on the opposite side of the bed, instead pressing himself against Magnus’ chest. Burying his face into Magnus’ shoulder, he hid his face from Magnus’ sight.

It had been surprising, considering Rodimus had been so timid in the first place even allowing Magnus to know he had been sneaking into his bed at night. Of course as the days went

on Rodimus had gotten comfortable to the point he could climb in while Magnus was awake as long as he didn't acknowledge the fact he was there. All that mattered was that he felt safer and could sleep through the night, so Magnus allowed it.

As much as Magnus wanted this to mean something else, in truth Rodimus probably just felt safer sleeping with Magnus facing him.

Cautious hands ghosted over Rodimus' sides, pressing into the small of his back to pull him closer into Magnus' frame.

Thick fingers once again found their way to that sweet spot at the base of his spoiler, and once again Rodimus melted. His vents popped open and he sighed, the hot air washing over the two of them as they laid their in silence.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Magnus' heavy voice broke the silence, "pulling you the way I did." In the alley, he had forcibly removed Rodimus, thrown him about in ways he never wanted to. "I know something is bothering you, and when you're ready to... tell me, i'll listen." It hadn't mattered that Rodimus still couldn't vocalize himself, Magnus had picked up his body language by this point and just *knew*. Rodimus just didn't want to tell him, how could he really? How could he tell him... everything.

Optics dimmed, Rodimus only listens, his fingers absently playing with one of Magnus' thick seams.

"I know it's not easy, and it never will be, but when you are ready... I'm here." Sliding one hand back over Rodimus' frame and stroking Rodimus' cheek, Magnus sighs. "When you're ready, tomorrow, a week, or years from now.. When *you're* ready." Silence fell over them once more, and Magnus continued to stroke Rodimus' cheeks until his own optics grew heavy.

Yawning and reaching down to pull the covers up over the both of them, Magnus gave Rodimus' forehead a small kiss before mumbling a tired *good night*.

It doesn't take Magnus long to fall into a deep slumber, his steady breaths suddenly becoming heavier as his frame relaxes. With one heavy arm still slung over Rodimus' frame, he keeps him nice and close.

Unfortunately, Rodimus hadn't been so lucky to drift off. Instead he lays there for hours, wide awake, *listening*.

Unable to get up and check the window, he cranked his audio receptors instead. Having pushed it to its limits, he listened carefully for anything that might sound slightly off. More specifically, *heavy footsteps*.

Every once in awhile he does hear them, but they are light, sluggish and often followed by drunken giggles from those living in the spaces around Magnus' apartment. The opening and closing of doors, the soft ping of the elevator, the rain beating against the windows, and the soft roll of thunder in the distance.

For what feels like an eternity he listens until finally he decides he should at least *try* and get some rest. Magnus would be sour with him in the morning if he saw him looking as rugged as he had tonight.

Shifting in his spot and carefully rolling over so his back was pressing against Magnus' chest, Rodimus spooned them. Wiggling back a bit to fit snugly on the nook of Magnus' body,

Rodimus sighs, sort of enjoying the feeling.

It was strange how perfectly he fit against Magnus, their frame seeming to lock in nicely together. Did it have to do with Magnus being so large and Rodimus being so small, probably, but he didn't care. It was warm, safe, and snug.

It felt nice, in truth better than nice, it was... wonderful. The way Magnus' arm was still draped over his waist felt nice, the tips of his large fingers grazing his smooth belly. It felt... *better* than just wonderful.

Shifting his hips slightly, Rodimus hesitates before sliding them back a bit. Just an inch from Magnus' groin, and then after a moment of contemplation, he pushes himself all the way back.

The moment Rodimus' aft touched Magnus' modesty plate, the larger mech shifted behind him. A soft grunt escaped him and his fingers curled against Rodimus belly, causing him to freeze in place.

Spark pounding against his chest, Rodimus waited a moment, feeling Magnus cuddle closer to him before falling still once more with a loud sigh.

Good, he hadn't woken him.

Without moving anymore, Rodimus just lays there, his aft still pressed into Magnus' groin.

Hmm.

Sliding his arms under his pillow and allowing his optics to dim offline, Rodimus allows his mind to wander.

Wonder if he's had any lovers.

That seemed unlikely, at least to Rodimus. Magnus had a dry sense of humor and a strong worth ethic. He didn't seem like the kind of mech who had time for frivolous things like *love*. Then again he did make time for Rodimus.

With how neat he is I doubt it.

Interfacing was rarely a neat pass time, and even so most mechs never wanted *neat*. In the heat of things it was messy, wet, sloppy, and *hot*.

Hm... he's probably... gentle.

Magnus had hardly seemed like someone who would put the bed through the wall. He seemed to calm, controlled, and patient. He had been nothing but those things to him so far, why not in the bed too?

A strange twang of heat twists in Rodimus' groin and he licks his lips, thighs suddenly rubbing together. It had been far too long since he had felt anything like that without being induced to feel it. He hadn't even been sure he could feel something like that ever again and it be *real*.

Face flushing at the thought of Magnus' massive hand cupping his belly and running up and down his frame, Rodimus shook his head and hid his face in his pillow.

His thighs rubbed harder together and he huffed, forcing himself to settle down.

Sleep, you idiot.

Rodimus told himself as he pulled his pink cheeks from his pillow. His armor flared out and a bit of built up heat puffed out.

Laying there for only a half an hour more, Rodimus' frame finally slipped into recharge.

He hadn't online his optics right away when he finally roused himself from slumber. Instead he laid there, pulling his hand that was still draped over Rodimus' frame up a bit to cup his hip. Thumbing at the seams, he allowed his hand to trace up Rodimus' side, stopping halfway to trail back down to the tip of his hip. Over and over he stroked until finally his optics dimmed to life.

He blinked, a little disoriented when he didn't see Rodimus' sweet face in front of him but instead the back of his head.

Glancing down, Magnus lifted his massive hand, taking note that he was spooning the little mech. Perhaps a past him would have pushed away, giving them a bit of personal space, but that was a past Magnus. The current Magnus let his hand float back down onto Rodimus' hip, tracing the little seams once more with his thick fingertips.

As much as he wanted to linger and lay in bed with Rodimus all day, there was work to be done.

Having spent maybe five minutes more soaking up the sweet moment, Magnus finally pushed himself away and off his side of the bed. From there he stood, stretching ruffling his armor as quietly as possible. After a quick rub of his back, Magnus walked around to Rodimus' side of the bed.

Despite the fact that he was sleeping, Rodimus looked like he hadn't had a good night's rest in months. His face was pale and there were dark rings under his sunken optics. The only good thing Magnus seemed to notice was his face was relaxed. The night before it had harbored so much worry, but now it was calm, relaxed.

Reaching down and stroking Rodimus' cheek with the backs of his fingers, Magnus smiled. He was cute, even looking a bit shabby, he was... adorable.

Reaching down and grabbing the covers, Magnus tugged it up and over Rodimus' shoulder, wanting to make sure he was nice and warm during his absence.

As Magnus tucked Rodimus in, his tank rumbled. In all the commotion last night he had forgotten to eat dinner himself. All the more reason to start making something for breakfast. Hopefully when Rodimus woke up he would be in the mood to eat something.

Exiting the room and heading to the kitchen, Magnus turned the kettle on and while he waited for it to heat, retrieved a mug from the counter.

Energon steaming once it was poured into his mug, Magnus set the kettle to a simmer mode and moved into the living room.

Turning on the holo screen and turning the volume down to a dull whisper, Magnus

watched the morning news. Nothing of interest as usual, being too far away from Cybertron to get anything interesting to watch, it was mostly issues alien to him.

Taking a sip of his energon and licking his busted lip, Magnus' optics' moved towards the main window. Staring at it a moment, he couldn't help himself but to move over to it.

Drawing back the curtain and taking a quick glance outside, he took another sip out of his mug.

The sun had risen enough that the outside world had a faint glow to it. Like usual a few cars passed by and the regular commuters stopped by the curbs below. Nothing at all out of the ordinary, just like the night before. Everything right down to the same people each morning was normal.

"Mhm." Releasing the curtain and moving to the sofa, Magnus sat, thick fingers tapping his mug in thought.

What exactly was Rodimus so afraid of? Was it the same thing that had set him off the first time in the market? What exactly was there that was causing him so much distress. As far as Magnus knew nothing was out of place. Rodimus hadn't been attacked, he was unscathed when he had found him, but scared out of his wits. What *was* it. What could it possibly be. No matter how hard he seemed to wrack his processor, he couldn't figure it out. If it had been one of those aliens Magnus had originally bought Rodimus from, he would have know. They were sort of hard to miss, slimy, tentacle covered, masses of sludge. He hadn't seen any sight of them, both times, so what then?

Perhaps Rodimus could just tell him himself when the time came. At least he hoped Rodimus would. He had hoped all the time they had spent together had crafted some sort of bond between them. Something trusting. If Rodimus couldn't trust Magnus after everything that had happened, then what?

Slouching a bit in place, Magnus looked over towards his bedroom. He could see the blankets rising and falling as Rodimus breathed.

Only time would tell.

It took Rodimus three days to finally settle to a point he didn't frequent the windows side. Still, he was compelled to check it at least twice a day- when he woke, and before they slept. Magnus had allowed him to, as it seemed to lull Rodimus' nerves and he had finally stopped gnawing on the tips of his fingers.

There had been a new issue that had arose from the days prior: whenever Magnus had suggested they leave the apartment for some air, or simply for a supply run, Rodimus refused. Downright refusing, he backed away from him the moment the suggestion was offered. As if afraid Magnus would grab him and drag him out, he made sure to keep out of the larger mech's reach. That though was only a temporary fix, as there was nowhere Rodimus could exactly hide from Magnus.

Despite trying to best to sooth Rodimus' worries, he didn't push him. When Rodimus backed up, he didn't give chase, but instead stayed in place and told Rodimus it was alright if he

didn't want to go. He didn't push the issues, but after the third day of Rodimus keeping himself cooped up to the living room primarily, Magnus began to worry.

They would be leaving in a few days for cybertron, and the last thing Magnus wanted to do was trap Rodimus in his alt mode again just to get him outside. Not to mention the sort of scene that Rodimus would make in the lobby if Magnus did *have* to pull him out. Hopefully, that could be avoided and Rodimus would trust him enough to follow.

At some point Rodimus *would* have to leave the apartment whether he liked it or not. Magnus wasn't allowing him to rot away in here.

During the third day of Rodimus' own isolation, Magnus received the call. The call informing him that the vocalizer he had been searching for was finally in his possession and all they had to do now was install it.

"He's refusing to leave the apartment."

"That attached to you, huh." Wheeljack joked, but cleared his intake when Magnus didn't make a sound back through the com. "Right, well-" Wheeljack started before Magnus interrupted.

"I don't want to drag him to you, is there anyway... anyway at all this can be done here?" He'd worked so hard for Rodimus' trust, now was not the time to put strain on it when they were so close to freedom.

"Well, yeah. It's really not that complex of a procedure, to be honest." Wheeljack snorted over the com line as he laughed. "If you provide me with some space for myself and a few tools to work, I should have no problem installing it." That was a relief.

"Perfect," Magnus sighed contently, "when are you coming?"

"I should be there about noon time. I need to pack up a few of the tools and after that i'll head over."

"Thank you, Wheeljack." There was a small hum on the other end of the com before Magnus closed the link and let his shoulders sag. Finally, the home stretch, now he just had to tell Rodimus.

"Roddy," Magnus stepped into the living room where Rodimus was currently standing by the window. He jumped when he heard Magnus, but turned around to face him, his spoiler twitching upward, "I have some goods news." He couldn't help a soft smile when Rodimus perked up and fluttered his spoiler. "Wheeljack has your vocalizer." It took a moment, but Rodimus' optics lit up and he touched his neck to confirm what Magnus had said. When the larger mech nodded, Rodimus' spoiler fluttered.

The little burst of energy suddenly faded when Rodimus realized that in order to get his vocalizer, he had to leave.

Spoiler sinking, he looked over towards the window, then up at Magnus who already knew what he was thinking.

"Wheeljack will be coming here to install it around noon time. Are you ready?" There was a frantic nod that followed from Rodimus. He had been more than ready to finally stop making these pathetic little beeps and clicks. "Good," Placing his hands on Rodimus' shoulders, Magnus continued, "and there is more." Rodimus delighted expression wavered a bit, not sure if the additional news was good or bad. Considering Magnus' face didn't seem grim, he listened. "In a

few days we are going to be leaving.” He could already see the confusion forming on Rodimus’ face. “This isn’t my... actually home. This isn’t where I spend the majority of my time. This is just one of the many outposts I have when I travel to different sectors.” The perks of being high up on the chain, comfortable living. “I’ll be returning to Cybertron-” At that he watched Rodimus’ face pale. “And you’re coming with me.”

Blinking, Rodimus’ optics brightened as he stared Magnus square in the face. As if he hadn’t believed him right away, the fine line that made up his mouth curved into a small smile when Magnus nodded to him. “I’m not leaving you here.” Spark pounding behind his chestplate, Rodimus small smile turned into a wide grin. “That is of course if you want to come.”

Of course I want to come, you idiot.

Pushing forward and wrapping his arms around Magnus’ thick waist, Rodimus hugged him, pressing his cheek as hard as he could against Magnus’ chest.

A deep chuckle escaped Magnus’ intake as he placed a hand on the top of Rodimus head, petting him lightly.

“I’ll help you get settled, and get you doing whatever it is you want to do. Everything from now on is up to you and you alone.” Locking optics as Rodimus pulled away slightly, Magnus smiled. “Remember that.”

Sure, he could do that. That was the easy part. The hard part was choosing exactly what he would do when they left. In truth, Rodimus had never thought of anything past Magnus and the current place they inhabited. A part of him had accepted living there forever with Magnus, but another part of him knew it was temporary despite Magnus never once giving him the idea he would do away with him.

Drawn from his thoughts when Magnus gave his head another pat, Rodimus looked up at him.

“It’s alright if you’re unsure. There is plenty of time to figure it out and there is no rush.” Rodimus still needed time to settle and soak in life. If anything Magnus wanted to give him a nice place to live and time to develop real relationships with others of his kind. “Before we leave, we need to pack a few things. Nothing much, just some paperwork and supplies for the trip.” Once everything was packed and carried to the ship bay, they would be off.

He should have anticipated a knock on the door would send Rodimus into a panic. The sound startled him to the point he had nearly jumped from his own plating. Immediately he began to pace, his fingers in his mouth and his optics darting around frantically as Magnus suddenly walked past him.

Jumping again at the realization that he was headed for the door, Rodimus rushed forward and grabbed Magnus’ arm. Digging his feet into the floor to try and slow Magnus down, Rodimus was just dragged a few feet.

“Roddy, relax,” Magnus cooed as he continued towards the door.

W-Wait! Wait! Mags, don’t!

Spoiler flapping in protest, Rodimus tugged harder, continuing to fail to stop Magnus.

Don't! Don't open it! It could be-

The knocking came again and this time a sing-songy voice followed.

“Here’s Jackie~!” Wheeljack chimed from the other side of the door as he knocked again and again.

Releasing Magnus’ arm, Rodimus stepped back as he watched Magnus unlock the door and open it. To his relief it really was Wheeljack on the other end of the door and not the Crimson mech. After Magnus had told him about Cybertron he had lost himself in thought for a few hours thinking about all the things he would see once on his home world. In doing so, he had forgotten to check out the window.

The blind panic that swelled in Rodimus’ chest dissipated but not entirely. He clenched and unclenched his hands as he watched Wheeljack enter the apartment, a big black case in one hand.

“Whoa,” Wheeljack’s optics along his back flick upwards as he spots Rodimus, “you look like hell.” In spite of having had a few days to rest, sleep still hadn’t come easy for the little hot rod, leaving him looking pale and exhausted most days.

“It’s been... a stressful few days.” Magnus admitted, closing the door behind Wheeljack and locking it.

“So, let’s not drag this out, kid’s waited long enough. Where should I set up?” Getting right to the point, Wheeljack patted his case.

“Right, of course, is the bedroom an okay spot? The bed is big and there is plenty of room around each side.”

“Perfect.” With that, Magnus motioned for Wheeljack to follow him, and then to Rodimus, who was slightly hesitant. “Are you ready kid?” Despite the mask covering Wheeljack’s mouth, his optics were soft, giving him a comforting feel.

With a sheepish nod, Rodimus tailed behind them, pausing at the doors threshold as they all stood around Magnus’ bed. Right away Wheeljack began to set up, setting his case down on the cleaned off nightstand. Flipping the clips and opening it, he began to fish around in it.

“Rodimus,” Rodimus stood at attention when Wheeljack spoke, “can you lay on your back for me?” Patting one side of the bed, Wheeljack waited for Rodimus to do as he had asked.

Swallowing hard and looking from the bed to Magnus, vacant memories of past clients started to stack up in his mind.

“It’s alright Roddy, I’ll be right here.” Magnus cooes and with that Rodimus licks his lips and lays down. Stiff as a board, but he lays by the side of the bed Wheeljack is closest too and clenches the sheets.

“Easy,” Tugging gently on the sheets by Rodimus’ hand, Wheeljack dims his optics, “you’re fine. Trust me, you’re in good hands, not the best, but good hands.” Chuckling as he turned back to his case, the scientist pulled out a data pad. “You’re going to feel some pressure while I work,” Reaching down with one hand and lightly touching around Rodimus’ neck, Wheeljack confirmed the specs on his data pad, “but nothing will hurt, I promise.” Setting the data pad down and using both hands to get a good look around Rodimus’ neck cables. They had healed nicely,

nearly all the way. Still some areas were mending, but it looked great. "I'm going to ease you into a light stasis."

"Is that necessary?" Magnus piped up behind him.

"Normally, no, but he's nervous." That was evident, "and you can handle a face full of fire, me on the other hand-" The finals on the scientist back wiggled. "I'm sure I could but I don't want to risk it. It would be better for the two of us and your furniture if he's feeling... good." Looking down at Rodimus, Wheeljack asked, "Is that alright with you?" He had been pleased when Rodimus nodded right away. "Good, let's get to it then." Pulling a small cord from the bottom of his data pad and plugging it into Rodimus' system, Wheeljack began to slowly ease Rodimus into stasis.

Right away Rodimus' optics flickered and he blinked rapidly, trying to shake of the sudden tired feeling. It weighed his frame down faster than he ever thought possible, and in seconds, he felt himself floating.

"That's it." Wheeljack spoke but his voice sounded deeper than usual. Everything around him seemed to move in slow motion, and anything that moved seemed to drag in space.

"How long is this going to take if I may ask?" Magnus moved close behind Wheeljack, appearing to Rodimus as a big blue blob. "Not that I wish to rush you."

"Half hour at best? If I was an actual medic I could probably have it installed in ten minutes but," With a shrug, Wheeljack removed the brand new vocalizer from his case, "i'm the best you have right now. I did get word back from Ratchet that he is on his way, but he didn't say exactly when he would be here."

"We're leaving in a few days for Cybertron."

"Well, in that case, Firstaid should be there." Getting right to work, Wheeljack leaned over Rodimus and dove right in. Delicately working around sensitive cables, Wheeljack made a path right for the damaged vocalizer. Clamping cables out of his way, he squinted often as he worked, focusing and patching little spots as he went. "It's going to take a little while for Rodimus' vocalizer to calibrate to his body. He will be able to talk right away but there might be a few hiccups. Nothing serious. It's going to be like a muscle, the more he uses it, the better it will sound over time, so make sure he chats your audio numb."

For one, Magnus couldn't wait to hear what Rodimus had to say. Sure he knew sort of what he sounded like, but it was always broken up and littered with static. To actually be able to hear him clearly and understand him-

"He's young, and he's already shown he's a fast healer, so I don't doubt it will take him long to get it warmed up." Leaning a little closer as the damaged vocalizer was in sight, Wheeljack hummed.

It was smashed, deep gouges pressed into it that looked like finger imprints. Without saying anything, Wheeljack began to cut the connections to it.

Below, Rodimus remained still, half lidded and oddly content. Every few moments he would shift and Wheeljack would gently scold him, telling him to stay steady, and he did.

"He looks good." Magnus blinked in surprise at the scientists comment. "The first time you showed him too me, wow, what a disaster. I really didn't think - I didn't expect you to put so much

into him. It's very selfless of you." Not that Magnus had been a selfish mech, but Wheeljack had never seen him put so much into one little mech before.

"What is that supposed to mean." There was probably more bitterness of the end of Magnus tongue than there should have been.

"What I mean is, it's good to see you opening up. It's nice to see this side of you. Not just the Duly Appointed side of you. The side of you that *isn't* interested in paperwork all day."

There is a brief moment of silence between them as Magnus contemplates what Wheeljack had said. Rodimus really had been the only mech he had ever *really* put any kind of thought into and he couldn't exactly figure out why.

Spark fluttering behind his chestplate, Magnus cleared his intake and turns towards the door.

"I'll give you some space to work." Heading out into the living room, Magnus rubbed his chest. Once his pulsing spark settled, he moved towards a few boxes in the corner, deciding to pack a bit to pass the time.

After every few boxes he would check back in on them, making sure Rodimus was okay. When he returned to packing, he could sometimes hear Wheeljack humming while he worked and wondered if Wheeljack full blown sang when he was alone in his lab. Probably.

"Ngn-" Rodimus' new vocalizer hummed to life as Wheeljack connected each cable. "Mhm-" A bit of static followed, and Rodimus squirmed, feeling the pressure Wheeljack had talked about earlier. Like he said, it hadn't hurt, but it was uncomfortable.

"Shh, easy, you're doing so well." Wire after wire, Wheeljack worked.

Doing his best to listen to Wheeljack's comically deep voice, Rodimus' glossy optics looked up at him. His vibrant optics were a blur, but his finals that lit up each time he hummed Rodimus could make out.

Squinting as he struggled to focus around the room, Rodimus made a small noise as he noticed he couldn't see a massive blue blob anywhere. When he shifted slightly to try and get a better look of the room, Wheeljack once again tutted at him, and he scrunched his face in frustration.

Mags.

Rodimus' lips move, and his vocalizer hums.

"Mags." His voice comes through the static, and he swallows hard, not realizing he had said something until Wheeljack sat up in surprise. Chuckling to himself after a second, he leaned down to finish up.

"He's here." Setting Rodimus' neck cables back in place and unclamping several of the larger ones, Wheeljack sits back. The damaged vocalizer sits on the nightstand, burnt out and rather crispy looking.

"Mags." Voice gritty, he says it again, and then a third time but it comes out ragged. "Mags."

"Roddy?" Popping his head back into the room, Magnus watched with round optics as

Rodimus' lips moved and a sweet voice emitted from them.

"Mags."

"I'm here," Entering slowly, Magnus found his way around Wheeljack and to Rodimus' side. Taking one of his little hands into his own and squeezing it, his optics glistened. "I'm here Roddy,"

"Pulling him from stasis." As Magnus sat down, Wheeljack took ahold of his data pad and gently brought Rodimus back to his functioning state.

Optics slowly dimming back to life, Rodimus blinked and turned his head towards Magnus. He squinted a bit, still struggling to focus on that big mug. When his double vision finally drifted into one, a dopy smile smeared itself across his way.

"Hey." Magnus whispered as he stroked his thumb over the top of Rodimus' little hand.

"Hey." Rodimus' says horsley.

"Mags," Wheeljack says and waits for the big mech to look over to him, "He should rest. He's fine, but he needs time to calibrate and the stasis will have him feeling tired for a little while. Shouldn't last for more than a half an hour to an hour. Just make sure he takes it easy."

"Of course." Headed out into the living room and towards the front door, Wheeljack paused before opening it. "Thank you, for everything." Claspig his hand in Wheeljack's, Magnus shook his hand.

"Take care of yourself, and Rodimus too." Again, the soft smile he was giving Magnus was hidden behind his mask, but Wheeljack had oddly expressive optics. They glistened and where soft, proud. "And you're welcome. Always ready to help a friend in need." Saluting the larger mech, Wheeljack took his leave.

Upon closing and locking the door, Magnus turned on his heels and rushed back towards his bedroom. He came to an abrupt stop when he spotted Rodimus sitting up in bed rubbing at his throat. He hummed, making soft noises to test out his ability to finally make more than just beeping and clicking noises.

Feeling Magnus' optics on him, he looked up, waiting for the larger mech to scold him for sitting up so soon. Instead, Magnus rubbed at his hands nervously, not exactly sure what to say. All this time he had so many questions, but now he couldn't figure out exactly what to say. The last thing he wanted to do was overwhelm Rodimus and ask the wrong thing.

"How do you feel?" Magnus' voice was softer than he wanted it to be, but he knew Rodimus heard him when his spoiler twitched upward.

"Good." Voice terribly gritty, Rodimus tried to clear his intake, though it did little to help. "Good." He said again, and despite the grainy nature of his voice, he couldn't help but smile. He had accepted the fact he might never hear himself speak again, the fact he was hearing himself had his frame buzzing with joy.

"Good." Stepping over to the edge of the bed and sitting on it, Magnus let his shoulders sag. He reached to the side, taking one of Rodimus' little hands into his own. Bringing it up to his lips, he pressed Rodimus' small knuckles into them, kissing each one.

"Roddy," He began, kissing a few more times before continuing, "I don't expect you to tell

me everything, now that you are able. Like I said the night before, when you are ready,” He felt Rodimus curl his fingers around his own, “I’ll be here to listen.”

Looking away as Magnus pressed his little hand into his lips, Rodimus felt the corners of his mouth curve upwards. He nodded, leaned to his left, and rested his head and body against Magnus’ frame.

“I know.”

One by one, Magnus stacked each box by the door, Rodimus setting down a few next to him. It hadn’t surprised him when Magnus eyed the way he was stacking and fixed the boxes to line up perfectly with one another after he set each one down.

“Last one?” Taking the last box from Rodimus’ arms, Magnus placed it in the pile and brushed his hands off. “Good, there, finished.” The day had progressed rather slowly after Wheeljack had left. For three hours Magnus had sat with Rodimus, the two of them just soaking each other in. They talked softly to one another, about everything and everything, and for the first time Magnus heard Rodimus laugh. It was a casual and rather mundane joke, but he laughed, and it was the sweetest thing Magnus had heard in a long time.

“Mhm.” There really hadn’t been much at all too pack, if anything they had at least a dozen boxes of things Magnus needed to take back with him. Most if not all of them should have been able to fit in his alt mode in the morning. From there they would head to the ship bay, load the ship, and be on their way.

“The trip is going to take a few days even with the quantum engines-” Magnus began to drone on about all the things he could read while on the trip, Rodimus not really listening to him in the background. The long ride wouldn’t bother him, as long as he was off this planet and alone with Magnus, he was content.

Face flushing at that, Rodimus cleared his intake and looked up to see Magnus yawning. It was his turn to look exhausted now. Having worked overtime to get all his paperwork in order and check inventory to make sure everything he needed had been packed, he was drained.

“Ready to call it a night?”

“Yeah.” Trailing behind Magnus as they entered the bedroom, they each took their usual spots on the bed. No longer feeling the need to sleep tucked to Magnus’ back, Rodimus cuddled close to his chest.

After a moment of settling into the soft sheets, Rodimus felt his face suddenly flush. Before, when he had no voice, this seemed so much easier, but now... now the potential of late night conversations seemed slightly intimidating. It wasn’t like he wouldn’t have liked some... soft bed talk, but he knew he would fumble with his words. Already, he was fumbling them in his head.

The blankets being pulled up over his shoulders pulled him from his own mind, causing him to look up at Magnus, who was very clearly struggling to keep his optics online.

So much for sweet talking, maybe it was for the best, he wasn’t sure if he was ready for that anyway. Chances are he’d say something stupid.

“Get some rest, we have a long day tomorrow.” Sliding his hand over Rodimus’ hip, Magnus lightly tugged him closer. Like all the nights before, he rubbed Rodimus’ back, massaging the little seams. “Good night, Rodimus.”

“Good night, Mags.” Like always, Magnus fell victim to recharge before him, leaving him to stare at his large face.

His lips look soft.

They didn’t just look soft, he knew they were soft. More than once Magnus had kissed his head, his cheeks, and hands. He *knew* they were soft, and a part of him wanted to lean forward and kiss him. Would he wake up? Would he be mad?

Scooting forwards, Rodimus licked his lips, his spark pounding behind his chest. He pursed his lips and leaned forwards, closer and closer until his lips were just barely touching Magnus’.

Sagging before they connected, Rodimus reached up and slid his hands over his own face. Feeling stupid, he rolled over, pressing his back once more to Magnus’ chest.

Pulling the covers up to his face and sighing harshly, Rodimus forced his optics offline.

Idiot.

Mags.

He swallowed hard, fingers raking along the covers as soft lips kissed a trail up his inner thigh. One kiss here, two more over there, lower and lower until Rodimus couldn’t help but choke out a gasp. He hiccuped, Arching off the bed when those plump lips grazed along his valve.

“Do you like that?” Magnus rumbled below, his thick hands hooked around Rodimus thighs to keep them apart as they quaked.

“Mhm~!” Liking it was an understatement. “O-oh Mags... oh... Mags~” Gasping again when he felt teeth nipping at a tender fold, Rodimus arched again.

Heat had coiled behind his back, collecting around his valve and causing it to pulse with need he hadn’t felt in far too long. The sensation was maddening, the more Magnus nipped and licked, the hotter he seemed to get.

He’d already been soaked, valve bubbling out lubricant in anticipation for everything that was happening and everything that could happen. Every few minutes it sent a shrill spike of pleasure up his spinal strut and he would squeal, kicking out one leg and sobbing to Magnus for more.

“Oh fu-” Something warm and wet slathered itself across and in between Rodimus’ folds. Lapping upwards and making slow figure eights around the very vibrant and very swollen outer node, Magnus hummed in response to Rodimus’ noises. “Oh Mags~!” Attempting to prop himself up on his elbows to watch Magnus work, Rodimus found himself struggling to keep himself up. Just the sight of Magnus eating him out had been too much to bare. His beautiful optics flicked upward at him, and with that he felt a new pulse of desire radiate through him. It has his outer node

swelling, aching for more attention and his inner valve walls clenching on nothing.

Optics glossed over with lost lust, he flopped backwards and covered his face. Embarrassed, he hid himself, not wanting Magnus to see the kind of faces he could reduce him into making with just a simple lap of his valve. It was maddening, just the way he could work his tongue. How could it feel that good? How did he know all the right places to dig himself into that made Rodimus groan between his finger? In truth he didn't care how he knew, he just didn't want him to stop any time soon.

That talented tongue continued to dance along his valve, quickly centering its focus on Rodimus' node while Magnus scooted his frame upwards.

With two large fingers, Magnus reached up and touched Rodimus' valve, toying with the swollen folds and massaging them to the point Rodimus was twisting under him.

"You're already so wet for me, you have wanted this for a long time, haven't you?" Purring, Magnus slipped his middle down until it was pressing against Rodimus' quivering valve ring. Soaked and oozing, Magnus swirled around it, watching Rodimus face twist and his body rattle under him.

Pressing the tip of his finger inside, Magnus listened as Rodimus yelped out, but quickly relaxed into the feeling.

"That's it." Magnus cooed, sliding his finger out, and then back in. Slowly, gently, he worked, his thumb rubbing and rolling his outer node to maximize his pleasure.

"Nhn!~" If pleasure hadn't been swelling in his belly, it sure was now. It built up faster than ever, and Rodimus felt himself right on the edge. He choked out a sob, struggling to keep himself from tipping over. Wanting this to last, he arched, pulling away from the stimulation only for Magnus to follow and tut at him.

"Mags! O-oh Mags! I-I-" Cut off when Magnus pushed his finger to the second knuckle, his frame rumbled in delight when Rodimus' face lit up. Valve fluttering and spurting a new rush of fluids, Rodimus wailed, overload ramming into him.

Valve biting down on the sill working digit, Rodimus' thighs tried and failed to close around Magnus' head. His pronged feet spread apart, and his spoiler that had been squished under him flapped upwards and trembled.

Floating down into afterglow, Rodimus' frame sank back into the soft sheets of the bed. Frame covered with a light sheen of sweat, his optics flickered offline. Wanting nothing more than to savor the feeling of Magnus loving on him, he hummed contently.

Below, Magnus kissed up his frame, keeping most of his attention on Rodimus' still shaking hips. Kissing here and there, he moved his hands upwards, rubbing at Rodimus' sides. Teasing at the seams, he moved higher and higher.

Rubbing under Rodimus' chest, Magnus' hands continue their ascent until they are slowly moving around his neck. Thick fingers rub along Rodimus' neck cables, lightly tugging on a few before finally, they began to coil.

Harder and harder until Rodimus forced his optics online, and that sweet blue face was no longer in view. Instead, a blood red visor met his gaze.

He opened his mouth to scream, and for a moment he had before the hands around his

throat clamped down harder, cutting him off.

Clawing at his arms, Rodimus tried to thrash, failing miserably as the massive mech's weight was over him. Pinning him in place, all he could do was scratch and try to scream.

The all too familiar crunching noise of metal filled Rodimus' audio as his neck cables began to give away. Intake tightening, Rodimus tried to wail, but there was silence.

Jerking up from the bed with his hands at his throat, Rodimus gasped greedily for air. Heaving in air to the point he wheezed, it took him a moment to realize there were no hands but his own around his neck.

Touching the cables in disbelief, he sagged when he confirmed they were fine. The metal was still smooth and each of his neck cables were where they were supposed to be, unscathed. His new vocalizer hummed, and he made a small noise, confirming that it still worked before letting his hands drop onto the sheets.

Just a nightmare, a horrible horrible nightmare.

Taking a second to catch his breath, Rodimus looked to his side, expecting to see Magnus awake and staring at him in the sudden jerk away. Instead the big mech had his back to Rodimus, at some point having rolled over during the night. The familiar heavy breaths told Rodimus he was still asleep and hadn't picked up on what had just happened.

Taking in a deep breath and holding it in the center of his chest for a few seconds, Rodimus sighed, his tired optics wandering over the covers until he spotted something odd.

A tent had formed by Rodimus' groin, and as he lifted up the covers to see his spike jutting up from his open panel, he snapped them back down.

Face flushing, he looked at Magnus, making sure he was actually asleep before lifting the covers again to look at his erect spike.

The dream may have not been real, but the arousal he had felt seemed to have traversed to his physical form. Had he made any noise? Is that why Magnus rolled over? Had he... poked him by mistake? This has never happened before.

Pulling back the covers as subtly as possible and sliding himself from the bed, Rodimus stood there silently for a moment. When he confirmed that Magnus hadn't been disturbed, he pulled the covers back and looked out the small window.

The sun was just starting to come up, the sky still dark with a hint of light at the horizon. There was no point in trying to get himself settled to sleep again, might as well clean up and get ready for the day.

Sneaking from the room, Rodimus closed the door nearly all the way before heading towards the washroom. Creepy as quietly as possible, the last thing he wanted was for Magnus to wake up and see him with his spike out.

Upon entering the washroom and closing the door behind himself, Rodimus let out a sigh

of relief.

Pushing back from the door and heading up to the shower, Rodimus twisted the handle and watched the water spurt from the shower head. Holding his hand under it and waiting until the water was work, he stepped in, letting the water pelt his face.

“Tsk.” Looking down, he stared at his spike, still out and standing unashamed. “Idiot.” He mumbled, a cautious hand reaching up and taking ahold of himself.

At first a part of him was going to command it back into its housing, but the other half of him had better ideas. Dirty ideas.

Stroking himself only once, heat swelled rapidly at the base of his belly, causing his spike to throb in his palm. Without any hesitation, he stroked again and again until a slow rhythm formed.

“Oh... fuc-” Tilting his head back and allowing the shower’s water to pelt his neck, Rodimus offlined his optics and kept working himself. Twisting his hand every few strokes, he squeezed a little harder. Running his hand over his spike’s head, he felt the familiar sticky slide of his own lubricant through the water. “Come on... come on.” He puffed, his spoiler dropping as he worked.

Stepping forwards and pressing his forehead against the cool tile walls, Rodimus parted his legs slightly. Angling his aft back and upwards, he exposed his oozing valve. It fluttered and he whimpered, feeling the familiar build of overload starting to pressure him into finishing.

Sliding his free hand down, Rodimus cupped his own valve, rubbing back and forth gently and squishing the swollen lips into himself.

“Mhm~!” Sliding two fingers up, he pressed against his outer node. Rolling and pinching the nub between his fingers, he hiccuped, his valve clenching down on nothing. “M-Mags~” He puffed, stroking himself a little faster as he worked. “Oh~ Mags I’m gonna...” Voice slightly hoarse, Rodimus dug his middle finger into himself. Dragging it in and out, he stuffed a second in and spread them apart.

Valve resisting, it clamped down around the digits, and eventually it was all just too much.

“Mmhph!~” Snapping his hand away from his valve, Rodimus brought it up to his mouth. Singing his teeth into the side of his hand in an attempt to muffle his cry, he pressed his face harder into the cool tile walls.

Below, the hand that had been frantically jerking his spike faltered, his strokes sloppy as he overloaded. Each stroke had transfluid spurting from his spike’s head, coating the shower wall twice before finally he had drained himself.

His valve spurted its own bit of fluid, soaking his inner thighs with a sheen of sticky fluid that was quickly washed away by the shower’s spray.

“Rodimus?” Jerking up right in the shower, Rodimus looked towards the washroom door. “Roddy? Are you alright?” Magnus’ voice was muffled behind it as he knocked twice.

Turning his back towards the door and doing his best to shield his interfacing array, Rodimus sputtered.

“D-don’t come in!” His voice cracked as he tried to stuff his still deflating spike back into

its panel. "I-Im just washing up!" As much as he knew Magnus wouldn't enter without him explicitly saying so, he still panicked to make himself decent.

There was an agonizing moment of silence before Magnus finally spoke up.

"I'll start breakfast." And with that, the soft thumps of Magnus' feet could be heard moving away from the door.

Deflating, Rodimus wilted in place and let out a harsh breath. Quickly getting his bearings, he splashed water along the spoiled wall and gave himself a quick wash. Upon finally getting his panel closed he stepped from the shower and dried off.

Once having gotten himself in order, he exited the washroom and met Magnus in the kitchen where he sat at the table with the morning news. A glass of warm energon was in front of him and one across the table waiting for Rodimus like always.

"Are you feeling alright?" Magnus asked as he watched Rodimus pick up the glass with a shaking hand. "You look a little flustered."

"Ah-" Taking a long swig of energon in hopes it would give him a little more time for an answer, Rodimus licked his lips, "must have been the hot water." He hadn't looked in the mirror before he exited the washroom but his cheeks were burning and he didn't doubt they were as red as his paint.

Having seemed to find that response reasonable, Magnus picked up his own energon glass and took a small sip.

"When we are done eating we can start moving the boxes to the shipping bay. Do you mind helping me load up?" He had hoped by now Rodimus fear of the outside had dwindled, but there was a hesitant look on his face. "I should be able to take most of them on the first trip if they are stacked right. The sooner they are loaded on the ship, the sooner we can leave." That was the seller, the sooner Rodimus was off this planet, the better.

"Yeah. Yeah I can do that."

A part of him felt a little awkward shoving boxes inside of Magnus' alt mode, but it didn't slow his pace one bit. One after another he tossed them inside, trying to fit them perfectly to maximize space. By the time they ran down to the last few boxes, only one remained and wouldn't fit.

"Do you mind walking it down to the docking bay?" Magnus asked through his alt mode. The ship bay was only a few blocks away. It hadn't made much sense to drive all the way there, unload and return for one box, and Rodimus knew that.

"I-" He began, spoiler drooping. Not super keen on the idea of walking, he picked up the box anyway. It was just a few blocks. If he walked fast he would be there in no time and they would be off, he just had to get it over with. "Yeah, I have it." Picking up the medium sized box, Rodimus gave the massive truck a small smile.

"See you in a few minutes." Closing his doors, Magnus' engines roared to life. He pulled away from the curb and merged into traffic, vanishing quickly up the street.

Without hesitation, Rodimus started walking, well, trotting. The sooner he was at the shipping bay with Magnus, the better. As much as he liked the freedom of walking alone, it had been soured on this planet. All the more reason to get off of it and walk somewhere else, Somewhere far away.

He paused at the first intersection, waiting patiently with a group of aliens to cross. He wouldn't miss them, wouldn't miss their glares, or their alien chatter.

The light turned and he moved forward with the group, his spoiler bouncing lightly against his back. He tossed the box up an inch, trying to get a better grip on it when he came to a second crossing and again he paused.

He stood there and watched the light's indicator count, and as it drew close to telling him it was okay to walk, a sudden pressure filled the air. Dense and heavy, it weighed down on him, and his spark fluttered in distress at it.

Glancing to his sides where aliens once again gathered around him, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps he was just letting his nerves get the better of him, so he walked on when the light changed. Having picked up his pace a bit when the feeling of panic hadn't subsided, he cursed at himself for not making the next crossings light in time. Forced to stop by the curb, he tapped his foot impatiently.

Again, aliens gathered around him but this time something or someone bumped his back. It had been light, just enough to make him lean forwards. Just as fast as it had happened, it was gone.

Relax... someone just... bumped you.

The growing panic in his chest and the knot in his throat thought otherwise. He just wanted to get to the shipping hanger and leave. He just had to walk faster.

The light changed and he bolted, his steps wide as he tried to put as much distance between him in the following commuters. There was no need to panic again, Magnus would no doubt be furious if he had to go looking for him in the backs of alleys again. He just had to keep it together. He was fine, Magnus trusted him to get there, so he would.

The light up ahead was counting down, and he hurried, wanting to make it in time to cross, but it shifted to red. As he stepped out into the street, someone snagged his arm, yanking him back onto the curb.

“What's the *hurry*?”

Breath leaving his vents, the knot in Rodimus' throat tightened to the point it ached and for a moment, he could have sworn his spark burst.

That *voice*. All too familiar, that voice. Deep and threatening, it rumbled over him, making his plating stand on edge. Those thick and heavy fingers wrapped around his arm didn't release him as they stood there, Rodimus with his back to them.

Clutching the box so hard his fingers threatened to puncture through, Rodimus felt surprised when the fingers holding him released him. Swallowing hard, he looked up to his right, and there it was, that blood red visor, just staring down at him.

Standing side by side as if the two of them had casually commuted every day, Rodimus looked forward and across the street. His optics burned bright, fear swallowing him.

How.

“Didn’t you miss me?” The mech asks by his side, looking up across the street as well. His voice was soft, oddly non threatening but Rodimus *knew*. “I have been *looking* all over for you.”

Dropping the box, Rodimus bolted across the street. He didn’t care that the light hadn’t changed yet, and he didn’t care about the cars honking at him as he dodged them. He had to get away, he had to get to Magnus.

A laugh like thunder could be heard behind him and the terrifying stomps of massive feet making chase. He couldn’t look back, too afraid to see how close the Crimson mech was. He just had to keep running, no matter what, he just had to keep going.

He made it a few blocks before his sides began to hurt, and he *had* to find somewhere to hide if not to just catch his breath.

Dashing down the first alley he saw, Rodimus made haste towards the first door in view. Ramming into it and turning the knob, he nearly sobbed out when it didn’t turn, locked. Pushing away from it, he ran further into the alley, locking onto a second door and rushing for it.

Throwing his body into it, it broke open causing him to tumble down onto the concrete floor.

Having caught himself on his hands and knees, he scrambled to to his feet, panting hard. Whirling around, he tried to figure out where he was, locking onto several large shipping containers.

Some sort of storage house perhaps, meaning he wasn’t far from Magnus.

Rushing towards a few of the smaller containers in hopes of finding someplace to hide, he hadn’t gotten far.

Yelping in agony as a hand shot out behind him and clamped down onto his spoiler, he was yanked backwards. Tossed across the room until his back met one of the shipping containers, he felt the metal crumble under the impact.

Sliding down and landing hard on his aft, his head was reeling. The room spun and he didn’t react fast enough when the massive red blob approached him.

“Why are you running?” A heavy hand grabbed Rodimus by the throat, pressing him hard against the damaged container to drag him up off his feet. “Didn’t you miss me?” Digging the side of his masked face into Rodimus’ neck, the massive mech chuckled. “I missed you.” He inhaled, taking in Rodimus’ sweet scent. “We *all* missed you.” Pulling his face back and squeezing Rodimus’ neck a little harder to the point his face started to turn red, the mech continued. “I had wondered where you managed to run off too.” With his free hand, the Crimson mech traced a thick servo up Rodimus’ flat belly. Tracing lower and lower until he was drawing small circles over Rodimus’ interface array, he purred. “I thought it was you in the marketplace, but I hadn’t been sure. You look so different,” Nosing Rodimus’ face again, the mech squeezed Rodimus’ array painfully. “Prettied yourself up for me. Look at you, shimmering and beautiful.”

Struggling to the best of his ability, Rodimus tried to scream, his voice cut off when the mech squeezed a little harder.

“How did you get your collar off? Hmm? Have you been letting someone else pop that pretty little seal of yours?”

“Fuck you!” Rodimus spat out, his teeth bared at the mech bitterly.

Visor brightening, the Crimson mech hummed.

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you. Your new master repaired you too. Do they punish you for having such a filthy mouth?” The last words sounded sinister, and the Crimson mech squeezed Rodimus cheeks together until he whimpered.

“I have... no master.”

“Oh? *Is* that so?” Amused, the Crimson mech continued to run his hand up along Rodimus’ body, always finding its way back down to his panel. “Then you won’t mind if I kill them for stealing my *property*.”

Your life is your own.

Magnus’ words rang out in Rodimus’ head.

Nobody owns you.

Pulling Rodimus away from the container and keeping him hoisted in the air, the Crimson mech slammed him into the ground. Pinning him in place, he loomed over him.

You have a choice.

The wind was knocked from Rodimus’ frame and his thoughts jumbled. Struggling meekly, he kicked, his fingers clawing at the still gripping hand around his throat.

“I’ll teach you to run away from me.” The familiar slide and click of a modesty plate opening could be heard from below. “You’re *mine*.”

“No-” Through bared teeth, Rodimus’ optics flare, “I don’t-” Seams parting, steam began to waft from them, “I don’t belong to **anybody**!” Optics flaring, Rodimus’ frame erupted, flames engulfing him.

Just about all the boxes has been loaded into the cargo hold of Magnus’ little ship. Stacking them just as nearly as he had back in the apartment, he placed his hands on his hips and mentally patted himself on the back for neat job well done.

“Fire!” Just as fast as someone had shouted it, several other aliens and mechs were gasping and rushing towards the hangar doors. “Fire!”

Turning around to see the commotion, Magnus followed a few of them outside, and there it was. Smoke as black as night billowed up to drench the sky in the far distance.

Tank flip flopping, Magnus watched the black clouds roll, something about them not sitting right with him.

“Rodimus.” He whispered softly, suddenly feeling a massive wave of dread wash over him.

Rushing out from the hangar and into the street, Magnus threw himself out and

transformed. Hitting the ground hard, he sped off towards the smoke.

He stood, his frame heaving as flames whipped around him. Fists clenched, he stepped forwards, optics glowing white with rage.

The Crimson mech had staggered back, the initial burst of fire having scalded the front half of his body. Having thrown himself back with a loud roar, he grabbed at his visor, struggling to get the melting glass away from his optics.

As he howled and thrashed, he hadn't seen Rodimus stalking towards him, his entire composure feral.

Dashing forward with one curled fist, Rodimus connected it to the Crimson mech's side. It didn't even matter that the plating on his own knuckles crumbled under the pressure, all that mattered was the mech staggering back from the impact.

It didn't matter that the room around them was slowly going up in flames as Rodimus walked, his body producing more and more the angrier he became. All that mattered was the blow, and the next, and the next. One after another until the Crimson mechs side armor crumbled off and he tripped over his own feet.

"I don't belong to you!" Rodimus' voice was different, almost demonic as he screamed. Stepping over the flailing Crimson mech's body, he sat on his melting chestplate. "I don't belong to anybody! Nobody! No one!" The next punch connected with the Crimson mech's mask, leaving his head to jerk to one side while Rodimus' other fist connected. "I'm NOT NOT NOT NOT-" Each word his fist connected until the faceplate flew off, revealing the mech's mouth. His teeth jagged and sharp, but it didn't stop Rodimus from slamming his fists into him any harder.

Energon coated his fists, splattering each time he brought his fists up. The fire around him flared harder, and he kept going.

"NEVER NEVER NEVER!" Raising his battered fist high for one last blow, Rodimus squeezed his own crumbling fingers together. As he brought his fist down with everything he had, his wrist was snagged, causing his entire body to jerk.

"Rodimus!" The voice was distorted in his audio. It crackled and fritzed, before he heard it again. "Rodimus!"

Looking over his shoulder, Rodimus' white optics met Magnus' blue ones. His massive hand was clenching Rodimus flaming fist, restraining him from the final blow. Energon was splattered across his nose, and his nose scrunched with further rage.

"That's enough! He's had enough!" Having to shout over the roaring flames, Magnus winced as his own hand was being scalded. "Enough!" Looking directly into those burning white optics, there was only pure rage, pain, and suffering. Built up over however many years Rodimus had suffered, it finally blew.

Yanking his hand away and shooting up in place to face Magnus, Rodimus' spoiler shot up as high as it could possibly go. His brows knitted together and he bared his teeth at Magnus, snarling.

“It’s him!” He pointed at the Crimson mech, his voice laced with hatred. “HIM HIM HIM!” He points harder, stomping his foot in frustration. “NEVER AGAIN, NEVER NEVER NEV-”

Cut off as his frame was yanked forwards, massive hands found their way around his frame. Pressing him into the comforting space he once knew as Magnus’ chest. Hugged as tightly as possible, Magnus didn’t let him go, but instead rested his chin on the top of Rodimus’ head.

“Never again.” Despite the flames engulfing his own frame, Magnus doesn’t let him go, no matter what. It hurt, but it doesn’t matter, nothing matters except Rodimus.

The fire around them raged on, Rodimus still growling in his embrace, optics still white.

“I’m here now.” Running his hands up the middle of Rodimus’ back and rubbing at the base of his damaged spoiler, Magnus cooes to him. “I’m here Roddy.”

Thick globs of tears welled under Rodimus’ optics as they flickered, the white fading to a light blue, then back to white as an internal struggle took place.

“It’s over Roddy. It’s over.” Feeling the little mech suddenly relax into his arms and the last of the flames burn out, Magnus sighed. “It’s alright. You’re alright.” He cooed, hearing Rodimus choked sobs below him. His tears don’t make it down his face, evaporating upon touching the scaling metal.

It’s finally over.

Wheeljack stood by Magnus’ side as they watched several mechs drag the Crimson mech from the ruined warehouse. Cuffed and unconscious, he was tossed into a containment vehicle and taken away.

“So that’s the guy, huh?” Wheeljack asked, arms crossed as he watched the vehicle vanish.

“Just one of many.” Magnus coughed, a bit of soot puffing out from his vents.

“Is he dead?” When the Crimson mech had been dragged out, the damage had been obvious and rather serious. His entire faceplate had been destroyed and his visor melted to his face.

“No, but Rodimus brought him damn close. Probably would have if I hadn’t shown up on time.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t broil you.” Chuckling as he looked over Magnus soot covered frame, he noted a few of the areas his armor had actually melted. Thankfully the damage was minimal.

“I would have grabbed him regardless if my body was able to handle it or not.” Wheeljack only grunted at Magnus comment. He knew he would have, and he was proud of Magnus for it.

Backup had been called, a clean up crew, and Wheeljack with Ratchet in tow had all arrived at the scene. They had arrived to see Magnus standing outside of the building, a steaming Rodimus in his arms.

With the Crimson mech in custody he would face trial and no doubt be put away from the rest of his life while also helping to shut down the slave trade in this sector. He would rot away in a small dark cell for the rest of his life, living in darkness like Rodimus once had. Would it ever be enough justice for all that had happened, no, but it was over.

Across the road, Rodimus sat on a small crate, Ratchet standing in front of him looking him over. He touched along Rodimus' neck, chest, and then looked at his damaged hands. The armor that had made up his knuckles had broken away, revealing the sensitive protoform under it. Scuffed and damaged, the mesh bled, but Rodimus was indifferent to it.

"Are you alright kid?" Ratchet asked as he wrapped Rodimus' knuckles. "You've been through hell, it's alright if you're not."

"I'm fine. I'm actually... really okay now." The rage had settled, and a weird sense of peace had wafted over Rodimus' frame. Had it been the right thing to do to nearly beat a mech to death, no, but some inner demons had been settled along the way. Not all of them, but enough that he felt lighter. "Just need... some rest." He blinked when Ratchet scoffed.

"Young punk, think you can just brush something like this off. You're more than tired, you're exhausted, low on fuel and literally falling apart." Rodimus couldn't help a small smile as Ratchet kept working. "I know someone just like you. Someone I think you should meet back on Cybertron. He was just like you at one point, lost, and then he became irritatingly spiritual." Rolling his optics at the thought, Ratchet continued. "His name is Drift and I think you two would get along pretty well. Drift could use a friend right now. You're both young, hot heads, maybe you two can straighten each other out."

"I'd like that." Glancing over his shoulder towards where Magnus and Wheeljack had been standing, Rodimus looked back to Ratchet. "Is Magnus alright?"

"Heh, he's fine. A little banged up but he's ten times sturdier than anybody else here. He'll be fine with some armor replacements and rest." Releasing Rodimus' hands once he finished, Ratchet sat next to him. "You know, you're probably the best thing that has happened to him."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, Magnus has been so work driven, seeing him... genuinely protecting you, caring for you, it's been freeing for him. You know you're the only one I have ever seen him smile at, now that's something really special." Laughing, Ratchet looked at Rodimus with soft optics. "Who saved who I wonder." Slapping Rodimus' shoulder and helping him stand, Ratchet motioned for Rodimus to go to Magnus. "Go, he's waiting for you."

Bowing his head at Ratchet, Rodimus began to limp across the street. Having made it only halfway before Magnus noticed him struggling, the larger mech met him in the middle.

Sliding their hands into each others, they stood there, covered head to toe in soot.

Gently, Magnus ran his thumbs over the bandages covering Rodimus' knuckles.

"Ready to go home?"

Pulling his hands from Magnus and reaching up to cup those large dirty cheeks of his, Rodimus pulled his face down.

Lips connecting, Magnus reached up and held Rodimus' little hands against his face, not wanting him to pull away.

Across the street, Ratchet elbowed Wheeljack who was making an obnoxiously loud *aww* sound.

“I’m ready.” Rodimus said breathlessly as he parted their lips.

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